

SISTERLY SAME-SEX SENTIMENT:  
NON-EROTIC FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINESE  
LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

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Ning Zhang

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Ning Zhang, Ph.D.

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This dissertation is a genealogical investigation of the thematic significance of female same-sex sentimentality in the construction of the space of female imaginary in modern Chinese literature from the beginning of the twentieth-century to contemporary popular culture. By focusing on the textual and cinematic representations in female-authored fiction and woman-centered films, I argue that female same-sex sentiment is primarily a psychological intimate relationship developed from the modern institution of education, in which women will try to avoid developing friendships with the opposite sex in order to maintain the virginity and the chastity that have historically been characterized by patriarchal censorship as moral codes for women. It helps the young female go through her social recasting of self-identification in the transitional stage from kin-inflected family to institutional-based society, and simultaneously convey her into a “homeward” journey of heterosexual marriage. It therefore reflects the integrity of heterosexual mechanics.

On the other hand, this intimate relationship between women raises a suggestion of female homoeroticism. By shifting the focus from whether female same-sex sentiment is purely non-erotic or really homosexual to the questions of within which institution and in what language that this female intimate relationship becomes suggestive of being homosexual, I argue that its

“in-between” position lies in a lack of feminine discourse based on real gender differentials. The suspicion of homoeroticism in female same-sex sentimentality is neither a representation nor a confirmation of female homoeroticism. Rather, it is a reflection of woman’s self-awareness of not slipping into homosexuality that has been labelled as both physically illicit and mentally abnormal. Secondly, it is also a reflection of the fact that feminine pleasure has politically been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters and has to remain inarticulate in language.

In this sense, female same-sex sentimentality has destabilized the fixed boundary of the binary system of heterosexuality from within the monolithic discourse of masculine Oneness. It thematically performs women’s dynamic interacted-ness with the nation-state system, as well as the discursive (de)construction of gender as a man-made category brought by the new visions regarding the constitution of the subject, gender, and sex in the fields of feminism and gender studies.

## BOIGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ning Zhang received a B.A. in Chinese Language and Literature from Nankai University (Tianjin, China) in 2003. She came to the United States and earned an M.A. in East Asian Studies from St. John's University in New York in 2008. She published a Chinese novel and translated two American non-fiction books into Chinese in 2009. She then entered the Ph.D. program in Asian Literature, Religion and Culture at Cornell University, completing and defending her doctoral dissertation in November 2017.

In memory of my father.

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## INTRODUCTION

Female same-sex sentiment is a new image that became visible in Chinese literary field at the beginning of the twentieth-century when China was driven into the course of modern civilization with the impacts of scientific knowledge and philosophical ideas from the West. As women had been liberated to being allowed to receive education in modern institutions, the young female developed an intimate relationship with a sisterly figure that she selected as an ideal ego who mirrored a panoramic trajectory of female maturation. As a modern invention that received hereditary characteristics while at the same time fundamentally different from the classical topos of the mistress-servant relationship in late-imperial Chinese literature, it shows how women themselves recognize and build up their identity in a blurring space that has been produced, feminized, and thereby fixed through the manipulation of gender strategy, and ignored as a minor stage in the course of women's maturation that has been politically invented and culturally inscribed by the dominant discourse of heterosexuality.

The significance of female same-sex sentimentality for female development is gradually being recognized through the fact that this theme has rarely been absent in female-authored fiction and women-centered films, some of which render a strong notion of female bonding by completely centering on the emotional attachments between women, and also through the fact that it has been designated as an inherent practice of women's writing in the discursive construction of female literary tradition, featuring the social empowerment of women's voice and

the modern quest of women's subjectivity. However, in various discussions that have shed light on the theme of female same-sex sentimental intimacy, it has either been taken as an integration of the exploration of women's subjectivity, for example, the role of female community, female bonding, or simply, sisterhood, in the constitution of a repressed self; or, it has been examined from its being a form of female homosexuality, for example, sisterly love as an emerging lesbianism under the overwhelming cultural imposition from the dominant discourse of heterosexuality. The distinction between the two different perspectives lies in a suspicious gaze on the homoeroticism of female same-sex sentimentality.

In my study of female same-sex sentimentality, first, I propose that, instead of debating whether female same-sex sentimentality is purely non-erotic or really homosexual and trying to figure out the way to differentiate them, the discussion on this theme might shift its focus to the questions of within which institution, in what language, and according to what kind of 'rules' female same-sex sentimental intimacy becomes suggestive of being homosexual. From this perspective, this theme might further invoke the question from what strategic position in public discourse has a form of female same-sex relationship been shaped politically as a site of gender operation in which women are invested with characteristics that are at once constitutive and subordinate to the system of nation-state. This dissertation attempts to answer some of these questions. Taking Judith Butler's suggestion that the theory of the psyche and the theory of power might be thought together in the discussion of becoming woman, I argue that, female same-sex sentiment is initially a psychologically intimate relationship developed from the

modern institution of education, in which women try to avoid developing friendships with the opposite sex in order to maintain the virginity and the chastity that have historically been characterized by patriarchal censorship as moral codes for women. Its primary function is to help the young female go through her social recasting of self-identification in the transitional stage from kin-inflected family to institution-based society, and simultaneously to convey her into a “homeward” journey of heterosexual marriage. It therefore reflects the integrity of heterosexual mechanics.

On the other hand, this intimate relationship between women raises a suggestion of female homoeroticism. My view on this “in-between” position of female same-sex sentimentality is owing to a lack of feminine discourse based on real gender differentials. That is to say, the suspicion of homoeroticism in female same-sex sentimentality is neither a representation nor a confirmation of female homoeroticism. Rather, it is a reflection of woman’s self-awareness and self-scrutiny of keeping away from and not slipping into homosexuality that has been labeled as both physically illicit and mentally abnormal. Secondly, it is also a reflection of what Luce Irigaray has pointed out, that feminine pleasure has politically been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters and has to remain inarticulate in language.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, female same-sex sentimentality has destabilized the fixed boundary of heterosexuality by opening up the enclosure of the dichotomy of being erotic or non-erotic in same-sex relationships into a variety of feminine pleasure, and become a possible force to undermine the binary system of

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<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23-25.

heterosexuality from within the monolithic discourse of, using Irigaray's words, masculine Oneness.<sup>2</sup> It thematically performs woman's dynamic interacted-ness with the system of nation-state as women endeavor to develop their social agency in different historical and social contexts – an enforced modern civilization in early twentieth-century China, Chinese revolution and political propaganda in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution, Chinese modernization and urbanization in the new era of economic reform, and China in an increasingly connected global context of transnationalism. Meanwhile, parallel to this process of women's subjectivation, it has also become the literary representation of the discursive (de)construction of gender as a man-made category brought by the new theoretical visions regarding the constitution of the subject, gender, and sex in the fields of feminism and gender studies.

The age of modernity is a world of categorization in terms of naming systems, in which distinct features are designated as differentials to bring out definitions for a variety of disciplines in human society. When the development of natural science, aiming at a further refining abstraction of the rules that govern the natural world, had inevitably been projected into this process of naming for distinction and distribution, social science, as a formal branch of sciences studying human behavior and human societies, launched an ongoing effort to engage with a theorization of identity to define a social individual by decoding the constitution of the self, in

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<sup>2</sup> In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray pointed out that, defined by the predominance of man's language and logic, woman's desire lacks a form of its own. Therefore, the ostensible multiplicity of woman's pleasure is in fact reductive to the sameness of masculine discourse, the same of the One. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23-33 and 139-52.

company with a rise of literary confessions of the inner world. New disciplines in social science that focused on the exploration of the self and the developmental process of the individual, for example, anthropology, psychology, and psychoanalysis, built their foundations on the basis of natural science, in particular, medical science, as the truth for the human race and as the reason for the development of modern society. This process of naming finally invested human society with a binary system with Oneness in domination of the Others.

Women's liberation in the age of modern civilization has been widely believed to be a secondary process that is being subjected to the domination of masculine discourse, invoking a deeper consideration of the constitutive characteristics of modernity. Being allowed to be present in the public sphere in a very limited range mainly centering on the modern institution of education, women were in fact liberated into a blurring space between the private and the public sphere. Meanwhile, as women began to tell their own experiences in their own words and in their own voices, in the form of literary creation, feminism, emerged as a site and an intersection of politics and literature, where personal feelings and sufferings were invested with the power to ask for social justice and equality of the sexes for the collectivity of women. In other words, as a subordinate discourse of masculine politics, women's liberation in modern civilization featuring clear boundaries of different categories with distinct definitions, at the same time produced a space of vagueness. It is a blurring space between the private and the public sphere with women standing right at the center of this intersection as subjects to legitimate the progress of modernity. It is fixed as a political site in which women have to request their discursive agency in an

enforced acceptance of a universal prohibition of women's discursive agency owing to the monolithic discourse of masculine politics, and at the same time becoming possibly flowing as women endeavor to develop their social agency in their dynamic interacted-ness with the system of nation-state. As Riley pointed out, the modern collectivity of women, as an emerging population of political subjects, was established upon its interacted relation to these categories – namely, the nineteenth-century sciences – in an ostensibly unsexed humanity.<sup>3</sup>

This space, a production of the problematic of women's liberation at the summit of modern civilization when women were assimilated into the newly emerging category of the "social," as both the social agents and the objects of reform, I would like to define as the space of the female imaginary, and to further explore the following questions revolving around it: What or who is the architect of this space? How is this space constructed in the course of modern civilization, and how does this space get connected to the entire mechanics of nation-state? What is the possibility that this space becomes a representation of the fluidity of becoming woman, and how does it perform this process of woman's subjectivation? How does it interplay with the dominant discourse of the binary system of heterosexuality?

In *The Emerging Lesbian*, Sang Tze-lan provided a genealogical investigation of female same-sex love from late-imperial China to the end of the twentieth century. According to her study, it was in the early twentieth-century that "female same-sex love," the word that she generally used, first underwent a historical transition from being a negligible relationship in pre-

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<sup>3</sup> Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 8-9.

modern China to being a discursive production defined by the creation of a neologism – “same-sex love” – with public significance, and with a close association with feminism and psychobiological abnormality. This was especially true of May Fourth fiction. Same-sex love then re-emerged in the form of fictionalized lesbian voices in elite literature in the post-Mao period, and was then featured in lesbian activist discourse in 1990s Taiwan. Re-examining the literary representations that center on female intimate relationships in the elite literature from the May Fourth era to the 1990s, as well as the social discourse revolving around the construction of female same-sex love in twentieth century China, Sang’s book is a genealogy of the discursive construction of female same-sex love, or using her terminology, lesbianism. The images of female-female intimacy defined with the neologism of same-sex love, *tongxing ai* 同性爱, in May Fourth fiction, are considered to be a forerunner of the re-emergent theme of female homoerotic desire in the late twentieth century. Sang contends that lesbian studies should not come out of feminism, and that Chinese homoerotic writing is better understood within the vision of gender analysis. However, her book is invested with a strong notion of lesbianism with its exclusive emphasis on the homoerotic side of female-female intimacy and with both a close reading of selected images centering on female homoeroticism and a reading of female-female intimacy as a representation of lesbianism. In her discussion of the literary representations of female homoerotic desire, she regarded Lin Bai and Chen Ran as representative female writers who prepared the ground for female homoerotic fiction in elite literature in the 1990s. She pointed out that the earlier generation of writers such as Zhang Jie, Liu Suola, and Wang Anyi,



“rarely explored physical desire between women and generally shunned the notion of homosexuality.”<sup>4</sup> By stating this, Sang indicated a genealogical progression in the literary representation of female homosexuality in the post-Mao period, on one hand; on the other hand, this statement also creates an enclosure of lesbianism separate from various female-female relationships involving same-sex intimacy.

In her discussion of the discursive construction of the female tradition in modern Chinese literature, Lydia Liu asserts that the female tradition in modern Chinese literature was, in fact, invented by the women critics in the second half of the 1980s, as a homogeneous one, to break away from the official feminism represented by the hegemonic apparatus of the All-China Women’s Federation. By examining the works of three prominent women writers from the May Fourth period to the present, Liu discussed the main features that the women critics attributed to this invented female tradition, in which female bonding was designated as an inherent feature of women’s writing as important as the quest of subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> The women critics in the eighties and nineties recognized (the early) Ding Ling as a pioneer in the female tradition, representing the legacy of the early twentieth century. The theme of women’s emotional bonding appeared in her work, “Shafei nüshi riji” 莎菲女士日记 (Miss Sophie’s Diary), and in other stories such as “Shujia Zhong” 暑假中 (Summer Break), as Liu conceived it, not so much as positive alternatives

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<sup>4</sup> Tze-lan Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 173.

<sup>5</sup> Lydia Liu, “Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature” in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-century China*, eds. Ellen Wider and David Der-wei Wang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 215.

to romantic love and marriage, but as something that carries the same weight as women's subjectivity. In 1979, Zhang Jie announced a final departure from the dominant literary orthodoxy of socialist realism with her short story "Ai shi buneng wangjide" 爱是不能忘记的 (Love Must Not Be Forgotten), in the subjective voice of the female narrator, bravely presenting the theme of personal love, which had been a forbidden subject in the long period of political propaganda and the Cultural Revolution. Marking another turning point in modern Chinese literature, Zhang's work was therefore considered a groundbreaking successor to the female tradition in the post-Mao period. Her 1983 novella, "Fangzhou" 方舟 (The Ark), centers on the theme of sisterhood in a discussion of women's subjectivity, as "a form of collective female consciousness."<sup>6</sup> Wang Anyi, about twenty years younger than Zhang Jie, has become the most brilliant woman writer in contemporary Chinese literature. One of her early stories, published in 1989, "Di Xiong Men" 弟兄们 (Brothers), also touched upon the theme of female same-sex emotional attachment. It even goes beyond the familiar pattern in which female bonding is discussed as an integration of the development of women's subjectivity and it investigates whether it is possible for sisterly love to survive the dominant discourse of heterosexuality. The theme of female bonding is positioned in the midst of the making of a female tradition into an inherent feature in association with women's subjectivity.

I study female same-sex sentimentality as a space of the female imaginary invented by

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 208. The novella focuses on the issue of female subjectivity and female consciousness through a representation of female bonding among three women who have already married and, in fact, have already divorced or separated from their husbands. They have been suffering from the conflicts between marriage and the pursuit for the self, as well as the consequences and problems brought on by their divorce and separation, and by age.

modernity. This female same-sex intimate relationship is fundamentally different from the female-female intimate relationships in late-imperial China, when the ideological conception of romantic intimacy was shaped by the patriarchal familial organization that centered on the issue of reproduction. That is to say, so long as the intimate relationship between the same sex didn't impact a heterosexual marriage and reproduction, it was not clearly identified as unhealthy or illicit. The theme of homosexual desire between women was therefore placed in an insignificant position as a genre of minor literature in the pre-modern period.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the theme of the mistress-servant relationship in the genre of Scholar-Beauty Romance, as the most common literary representation revolving around intimate relationships between young females in classical Chinese literature, and, in many cases, as the subplot of the romantic relationship between the young scholar and the heroine, indeed shares similarities with the female same-sex sentimentality in the modern time. First of all, both of them are preoccupied with and work on behalf of an overwhelmingly heterosexual orientation. The close association of the mistress-servant relationship with heterosexual romance that secures an absolutely non-erotic same-sex relation is the most important similarity that makes it a predecessor of female same-sex intimacy in the modern era. However, mistress-servant intimacy is fundamentally different from its modern affinity in terms of the impassable hierarchical barrier between the mistress and her

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<sup>7</sup> According to Sang Tze-lan's investigation on the theme of female same-sex love in premodern Chinese literature, besides erotic art, even in minor literature – a variety of genres opposed to the canonical representations of Confucian ideology, namely, novels (*xiaoshuo*), literati journals (*wenren biji*), elite women's poetry, and storytelling by singing of verse (*tanci*), few texts primarily center on the theme of romantic love between women. See Tze-lan Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 44-45.

servant, in that the mistress-servant relation was generated within the patriarchal familial structure. Female same-sex sentimentality, though, in the modern era developed as an intimate relationship through the modern education system, conveying women's transition from pre-modern kin-inflected positions to modern institutional society.

Female same-sex sentimentality was a relationship produced from the modern institution of education over the course of Westernization in early twentieth-century China. First of all, the modern education system that was established and quickly developed in the big cities along the east coast and the main ports along the Yangzi River provided an urban institutional space for female same-sex relationships. That women were allowed to attend school to be educated, not only freed them from the confinement within the narrow circle of the kin-inflected familial structure in their primary domestic roles as wives and daughters, but also created a public space, in particular for young females, among whom intimate friendships developed. The new women, left their familial affiliations, which served as both a cage and an umbrella of protection, and they had very similar life experiences with one another; intimate relationships between them provided a psychological support in their uncertainty about the future, which was brought about by the emergence of free love, and ultimately, for survival in the social institutions that prepared young women for women's liberation, only to the extent that women were liberated to approve modern progress. Women's liberation, on the other hand, facilitated women's writing, in which women were able to search for the ultimate self, if there is one, by extracting from the depths of their inner worlds. Foucault stated that the discursive construction of the modern era was in

company with a practice of confession that was widely believed to be a revelation of truth.<sup>8</sup> If feminism is considered to be an interdisciplinary intersection of a political schema for women's rights and a literary practice for women's voices, literature constructs feminism as an expressive passage of women's voices, going from the private sphere to the public sphere – an intersection where the private sphere and the public sphere overlap. In the examination of the female-authored literary works in which women's voices were publicized as internal monologues on the search of a true self that was struggling with the dilemma between the longing of being modernized and an enforced modernization in the discursive domination of masculinity, a feminine anxiety over the uncertainty about the future emerged through the image of sentimental intimacy developed between young females in modern institutions. This feminine anxiety, caused by and invested with the discursive construction of Chinese modernity in the early twentieth century, consisted mainly of women's inner struggles over heterosexual romantic relations caused by the rise of free love instead of arranged marriage as a mark of modern progress. At the same time, there was an ambivalence, in particular for women, caused by a conflict in social reality between the opportunity to be educated and the very little chance for women to have a financially independent life by finding a job after being educated, and the psychological stress caused by the longing for a free life and an ultimate return to the domestic roles through the upcoming heterosexual marriage. Sisterly sentimental intimacy that developed between young females who suffered the same anxieties at the early stage of Chinese modernity carries this

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I, An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 58.

modern anxiety that has been characterized as feminine.

The modern education system was established on the basis of sex segregation under a strict surveillance and supervision. In other words, this public space for the New Women, carrying women's transitional stages from a kin-inflected position to the socially active identity of *nǚ xuesheng* 女学生 (girl student), is primarily a production of patriarchy aiming to maintain women's virginity. This gender strategy leads to a suppression of sex and at the same time targets women as the center of sexuality. Foucault stated that, with the coming of the modern era, sex has been rationalized through being placed in a binary system – licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden, and then essentially repressed through the power of law, a multiplicity of force relations.<sup>9</sup> In other words, sex became a permissible utterance in public in the form of repression and negation. This public space was created by the modern education system, in particular for young females; in it, the notion of the New Woman that is distinguished from the traditional womanhood of being confined within the kinship bonding, but remains subordinated to the order of masculinity. This was reinforced through a strict sex-segregated supervision in complicity with the learning of knowledge on the basis of evolution theory under the framework of a binary system.

Meanwhile, invested with a clear consciousness of homosexuality as abnormal, this sentimental intimacy between young females contained characteristic components of sexuality. The importation of Western science in the fields of medicine, psychology, and psychoanalysis

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 82-85.

introduced the concept of sexual abnormality, a concept which was endorsed based on the superiority of the progress of Western civilization as an advanced knowledge of the human race and human society at the time. Among various theories revolving around the construction of modernity, Hegelian dialectics and Freudian psychoanalysis revolutionized people's recognition of questions concerning identity and the subject's constitutive relation to alterity in the complex web of relationships in human society. At the same time, they raised the question of how to recognize women, who had been liberated as a population that could not be ignored to legitimate the progress of modern civilization, by allowing them to participate in a limited range of public activities centering on the institution of education. Freudian psychoanalysis, with a new set of theories and therapies centered on the unconscious, had an important influence on Chinese literature in the Republican era. Chinese intellectuals learned psychoanalysis as an advanced theory from the West and applied it to their literary practices, in which they explored the inner self with a psychoanalytic interpretation of the unconscious and the stages of self-development based on sexual drives. Literary themes revolving around the ego, the father-daughter relation, the mother-daughter relation, the notion of the unconscious, the fear of castration, and the impact of self-development from childhood demonstrated the influence of psychoanalysis, with a clear awareness of the concept of right and wrong derived from the modern binary framework presented in forms of self-criticism, confession and self-condemnation throughout the narratives.

Psychoanalysis joined the modern scientific theory of evolution in viewing homosexuality as illicit sexual behavior that had a catastrophic effect on reproduction, and developing a

personality that was mentally unhealthy and needed therapeutic intervention. That homosexuality was defined as both a morbid sexual orientation and a mental disorder made young females self-conscious about their intimate relationships, which had been considered a psychological intimacy that naturally developed between young females and their roommates and classmates at school. Their close bonds enable them to survive various pressures in the institutional society at first, but then ran the risk of slipping into a same-sex relationship that was widely believed to be illicit and abnormal. The problematic position of physical intimacy in female homosexuality even strengthened the suspect nature of the relationship, in that the absence of physical intimacy, which was usually true for sisterly intimacy, did not secure a safe same-sex relationship, while some physical closeness such as holding hands, hugging, and even kissing, which was indeed common among young females, raised suspicion about the possibility of homosexual orientation. This suspicion of female homoeroticism in female same-sex sentimentality was finally engendered in complicity with the fact that the readership that mainly constituted of the urban middle class was educated from the same institution of modern education as a population of Foucault's "docile bodies" whose knowledge was built on the basis of the modern binary system of normality. That is to say, the rationalization of sexuality in the modern binary framework is in company with a de-naturalization of the female same-sex relationship. The suggestion of homosexual orientation in intimate relationships between young females is neither a representation of female homoeroticism, nor a confirmation of female homosexuality, but rather, it is merely a reflection of the awareness of the abnormality of homosexuality.



The modern equipment produced a vague area of the space of the female imaginary constituted by female same-sex sentimentality, in which the nature of female intimacy became suspicious under the interrogation of modern discourse established on the basis of masculine Oneness. Our heroines, who were educated through the modern institution system, were self-aware about whether their intimate relationships contained a (homo)sexual character, and self-scrutiny was generated from such self-suspicion to prevent a slip into homosexuality that was labeled abnormal. This vagueness, on the other hand, also breaks the absolute enclosure of heterosexuality that was supported by the modern binary system – a division of all conceptions into normal and abnormal, so that new possibilities are engendered in association with a new topos to create a female imaginary as the politics of social discourse changes.

The theme of female same-sex sentimentality was de-selected for decades in the era of the Chinese revolution, from the end of 1930s through the political propaganda of the 1950s to the 1970s. It re-emerged in association with the discussion of women's subjectivity in the new era of Chinese economic reform, as a primary characteristic that was inherently embedded in the female tradition in modern Chinese literature. Lydia Liu revealed that the reason for the absence of sisterly sentimentality is that the state discourse "posits the equality between men and women by depriving the latter of their difference."<sup>10</sup> She further pointed out, "the image of liberated daughter and the figure of the strong female Party leader celebrated in the literature of socialist

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<sup>10</sup> Lydia Liu, "Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature" in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-century China*, eds. Ellen Wider and David Der-wei Wang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 196.

realism are invented for the purpose of abolishing the patriarchal discriminatory construction of gender, but they end up denying difference to women.”<sup>11</sup> I would propose that they might not be simply, completely “invented,” given the fact that in the period of early socialism, women’s liberation indeed made good progress in providing women more working opportunities in the public, compared to the days before the Liberation. According to scholarly research, for example, Gail Hershatter’s research on local labor models in 1950s China, women’s lives, in particular for those in the rural areas, were indeed changed into a more outward-bound mode and women remembered the 1950s as a golden age. Such literary invention is more likely operated by foregrounding the “state,” using Riley’s word, of women being recognized as historical subjects and at the same time objects of the state discourse of revolution and socialism, in complicity with a de-selection of female sentimentality. With the modern anxiety revolving around heterosexual romance and the new pressures that Chinese women might have in institutionalized society in the post-Mao era of the Chinese economic reform, female same-sex sentimentality re-emerged with new content that focused on the conflict between the shaping of women’s subjectivity and heterosexual marriage. It once again raised a question of homosexual tendency, given that the sisterly relationship is positioned on the same level as heterosexual marriage and that our heroines always show a strong longing for a female bonding that will last forever, as they have suffered in their heterosexual marriages. The re-emergence of the theme of female same-sex sentimentality in contemporary Chinese literature and popular culture should be understood and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 196.

discussed together with the new development of women's liberation and feminist theories.

The worldwide women's liberation movement during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s brought women into the mainstream of human society for the first time. The establishment of women's organizations, such as the National Organization for Women, together with the social activities that they advocated, indeed made great progress in women's rights. Meanwhile, the rise of the World War II generation brought a change of values and, moreover, female homosexuality, as a new form of same-sex relationship, was in a quest for legitimation. This once again raised the question as to whether woman, as a socially constructed category of gender, is, ultimately, reductive to the anatomical sex of the female. Women's liberation aimed to bring out social justice and equality of the sexes, but it had always been trapped in a problematic dilemma in that women were liberated only to the extent of being subjected to the domination of masculine discourse. It was now in quest of new approaches whereby the female imaginary is neither a simple substitution nor a total subversion of masculine oneness. A new feminist wave, aiming to demonstrate in detail the whole process of targeting women as the Other of men, endeavored to seek a radically different approach that is decoupled from the domination of masculine oneness to re-discover the discursive construction of the female imaginary on the basis of real gender differences.

This new wave of feminism started from a re-examination of Freudian psychoanalysis as both a reference for and a target of feminist theories. In his 1933 lecture on femininity, Freud first clarified that "psychoanalysis does not try to describe what a woman is – that would be a

task it could scarcely perform – but sets to enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, Freud is looking for a psychoanalytic approach – a new approach other than, but based on, anatomy and psychology – to interpret how a woman, from being a bisexual little girl, acquires the characteristics of being feminine through self-identification, and finally develops into an individual in opposition to masculine dispositions. Although Freud didn’t think anatomy could be a basis for interpreting femininity, and also did not believe that masculinity was positive and femininity was passive, his psychoanalytic interpretation of femininity is, ultimately, reductive to the anatomical distinction between the sexes, and woman is designated in opposition to man as being passive. That is to say, Freudian femininity is an instinctive nature determined by sexual function. We are in fact bound to have doubts about the psychoanalytic interpretation of not only the whole process of becoming a woman but also the developmental trajectory of human beings, which consists of a series of fixed stages ascribed to sexual drive. Furthermore, based on the assumption of a binary system with masculinity as an existing parameter of normality, Freud’s statement that the wish for a penis is the original reason for the acquisition of feminine characteristics, as well as a woman’s initiation into the process of self-identification, is unacceptable for and sharply criticized by feminism: what Freud employed to describe femininity – envy, jealousy, narcissism, physical vanity, shame and masochism – and that these are all caused by genital deficiency.

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<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XXII (1932-36) New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey (London, Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 116.

According to Freud, the castration complex is the turning point from the pre-Oedipus phase to the Oedipus complex. It is responsible for the future formation of the feminine characteristics of envy and jealousy that developed from penis-envy, the narcissism that has an influence on women's choice of an object in accordance with a narcissistic ideal of the paternal type, physical vanity as a late compensation for the original sexual inferiority, and shame as a concealment of genital deficiency. Moreover, Freud stated that the absence of fear of castration leads to a lack of the motivation to surmount the Oedipus complex; thus, the superego for women cannot obtain the strength and independence that give it cultural significance. Freud implied that women's development is inherently problematic.

Freudian psychoanalysis, in particular his interpretation of femininity, was in general criticized by feminist critics as a scientific endorsement of patriarchy. At the same time, his creation of psychoanalysis was not only an applied practice of therapy but also a theoretical framework for investigating an individual's self-development that invoked a new way of thinking, upon which our explorations on the recognition of the self and self-identification were extended. It evokes critical thinking of the questions: Is there a narcissistic ideal for women's choice of an object? Is it a paternal type?

Lacanian psychoanalysis, as a big innovation that broke new ground in the quest to discover how to identify the self in relation to others in complex social webs, opened up new horizons to psychoanalysis by switching its schema from Freudian psychosexuality to a new principle with language as the central role. Psychoanalysis and feminism are two widely separated realms that

oppose each other in terms of the sharp feminist critiques of Freud, the father of patriarchy. Yet they also gave each other new viability through interdisciplinary criticisms, which found even more fertile soil for growth when Lacan's symbolic world of discourse produced a way of thinking that is at the same time feminist, psychoanalytic, and highly literary, for example, in the works of the French feminists, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva.

In the long life trek of becoming a woman, maternity followed heterosexual marriage as a cornerstone upon which the institution of womanhood rested and was completed. Becoming a mother, together with the unavoidable concomitant domestic roles, became a truly insurmountable difficulty for women in achieving their ambitions of pursuing a career ideal. The first anthology of psychoanalytic feminist criticism, *The (M)other Tongue*, is a major monument that investigates the institution of mothering as a joint site of feminism and post-structuralism in that the mother, as a symbolic figure of the silent, the ignored, and the invisible in the pre-Oedipal phase, embodies a narrative to deconstruct the dominant discourse of patriarchy. The title of the book, *The (M)other Tongue*, with the "M" in parenthesis, implies a double complexity: there is an otherness – an ignored discourse embodied by the symbolic mother – in our mother tongue, the mother tongue in the meaning of our primary language that "we learnt at our mother's breast," a patriarchal one with the symbolic father as the center of the language and the law. More importantly, the title also implies that this otherness – another mode of discourse whose authority is the mother – lies nowhere but precisely within our mother tongue. In the book, as Gallop observed, feminists and post-structuralists, aim to discover "a mode of

expressivity which is not already shackled” by the dominant discourse, but is not, from outside the dominant discourse either: “the other is already inscribed in the mother tongue,” and the mother tongue contains double notions of our primary language as/and the dominant discourse of patriarchy.<sup>13</sup> Many essays in the book attempted to state the point that, as Gallop concluded, “In trying to move beyond the father, the mother looks like an alternative, but if we are trying to move beyond patriarchy, the mother is not outside. ... The early mother may appear to be outside patriarchy, but that very idea of the mother (and the woman) as outside of culture, society, and politics is an essential ideological component of patriarchy.”<sup>14</sup>

With her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler once again revolutionized our understanding of becoming woman, the process that culturally constructed woman as a gender category through social recasting. First, by asserting that there is no natural body that pre-exists culture and discourse, Butler collapses the sex/gender distinction. All sexual bodies are already gendered from the very beginning of their social existence.<sup>15</sup> This statement deconstructs a number of feminist theories that are based on the assumption that a stable but oppressed female subject pre-exists and is passively represented. Second, Butler proposed, as a theoretical innovation that formulates the center of her theorizations of identity and the body, that gender is neither normative nor descriptive, but performative. According to Butler, gender is not a “being” but a “doing.” The female body – “the gender core” – is in fact produced by the discursive regulations

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<sup>13</sup> Jane Gallop, “Reading the Mother Tongue: Psychoanalytic Feminist Criticism” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 13, No. 2, The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis (Winter, 1987), 319-20.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 91.

of the law; as she puts it, “acts, gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.”<sup>16</sup> Third, by stating that it is not the case that the subject selects his/her gender, but rather, the subject is done by gender, Butler reverses the cause-effect relation between the subject and gender. That is to say, the female subject, with her already gendered body, is a result of a series of discursive actions of gender strategy that is manipulated by masculine discourse to maintain the intact mechanics of heterosexuality. Butler also fundamentally undermines Freudian femininity, in which a woman’s identification is achieved through two strata – the pre-Oedipus phase, in which the girl has a strong affectionate attachment to her mother, and the Oedipus complex that features a turning to her father. That means a child’s desire for primary dispositions – being essentially homosexual or heterosexual – pre-exists and is decisive in his/her future acquisition of characteristics; according to Butler, “the infant’s identification with the parent of the same or the opposite sex is not the result of its primary dispositions, but the identifications Freud claims stem from these dispositions have already taken place within a heterosexual matrix of desire.”<sup>17</sup>

To return to our discussion of female same-sex sentimentality, with all these extended analyses in the fields of feminism and gender studies that critically rethink the constitution of the subject, gender and sex, our heroines, as the architects of the space of the female imaginary constituted by female same-sex sentimentality, are precisely engendered as the subjects in their

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 173.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 92.



search of the self through the same-sex intimate relationship that developed within the heterosexual frame based on the monolithic discourse of masculinity. In other words, there is no primary self awaiting discovery by our heroines; the self, the female subject with a sexed body, is precisely constituted in the process of searching. This searching process is a set of actions invested with the discursive complexity of modernity, including gaining education through modern institutions, developing a same-sex intimate relationship to survive modern anxiety, conquering the conflict between the oppression of heterosexual marriage and self-fulfillment of ambitions through same-sex sentimental intimacy, and so on. Therefore, if there is someone who functioned as Lacan's ideal ego for the young female to search for, or to build up the self, she is destined to be a female, and their same-sex intimacy is also destined to have a non-erotic start, given that women's identification takes place and is manipulated within the heterosexual framework. By the time a girl realizes that she is the Other of the dominant masculinity, she has already become aware of the fact that she is the result of the heterosexual marriage of her parents. The little girl is already within the heterosexual matrix as a production. As I have argued, our heroines, who develop a same-sex intimate relationship to get through the patriarchal censorship prescribing female virginity when they gain their education through an institutional system based on modern knowledge, are at the same time self-aware about keeping away from homosexuality, which has been labeled as abnormal and mentally illicit. This self-awareness further leads to a self-scrutiny that ensures that their intimate same-sex relationships do not slip into homoeroticism. This, together with the suspicion of female homosexuality produced by

public censorship, generates a vague area of the space of female imaginary, in which a de-naturalization of sisterly intimacy is achieved through the masculine rationalization of modern society. As a result, sisterly intimacy becomes suspect for its homosexual tendency on one hand; on the other hand, this vagueness provides new possibilities for female same-sex sentimentality to go beyond the confines of the (hetero)sexual boundary of the modern binary system. That is to say, the instability of the female imaginary is precisely generated from within the strict fixity of the binary system. As Butler claims, there is no origin or cause of gender; instead, “gender” is an open-ended process, a sequence of acts or events which does not originate and which is never fully or finally “realized.”<sup>18</sup> In the era of post-modernism, as the heterosexual matrix has finally been collapsed with the growth of new forms of sexual relationships that have been generated precisely from within the heterosexual system, female same-sex sentimentality, as a discursive practice of the fluidity of the female imaginary, reserves the possibilities of going beyond the heterosexual enclosure by showing an indeed suspicious slip between being a non-erotic sisterly intimacy to a homoerotic tendency.

Now we encounter the question again, is there a reason for the suspicion of homoeroticism in female same-sex sentimentality? If the suspicion of being homoerotic in female same-sex sentimentality is caused by the modern categorization of homosexuality as being abnormal and a consequent self-awareness of this notion, then what constructs the connection between the two and ultimately causes the suspicion? Is there an internal division in the discursive construction of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 90.

female same-sex sentimentality? Or, to what extent is non-erotic sisterly intimacy separate from female homoeroticism? What causes our hesitation in considering if an intimate relationship between females is homosexual or purely non-erotic? By asking these questions, I have no intention of denying female homoeroticism; I'm not indicating that lesbianism should be discussed separately from the study of the female imaginary, either. Rather, in my study of female same-sex sentimentality, as both a literary theme and a social phenomenon, it is the absence of a variety of existing representations of female same-sex relationships that results from the narrowness of female homosexuality, defined in accordance with the patterns of same-sex relationships between men, that produces a suspicion, or an uncertainty, of female same-sex intimacy, with a problematic intervention of physical closeness. The physical closeness between young females, including walking hand-in-hand, hugging, and even kissing, is a very natural physical expression of psychological intimacy, given that any interior sentimentality will correspond with appropriate (or inappropriate) exteriority. It is not necessarily associated with (homo)sexuality. The particularity of female same-sex intimacy features psychological projection as a representation of femininity that has been formed in the long history of women's oppression in the social system of patriarchy and gender inequality; therefore, it is inappropriate to define female homosexual relationships in accordance with the existing homosexual patterns for males as a parameter. How can we articulate the same-sex relationship, and how can we articulate the non-erotic female same-sex sentimentality within the reign of masculinity and heterosexuality, ultimately? There are finally no other criteria to evaluate such a same-sex representation but a

doomed comparison with heterosexual norms. When Irigaray proposes an attempt to rediscover a possible place for the feminine imaginary and feminine discourse that is neither a reduction to the masculine oneness, nor a simple substitution of masculine discourse, she believes that feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language given that the current dominant logic presupposes a lack of sexual difference and makes the masculine logic the only discourse, as female sexuality has been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters. The current language work defined by a single sex has produced and continues to hold the syntax that the masculine maintains mastery over the discourse.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, to close this introductory chapter, I intend to reflect on my own definition of terminology. Given its constitutive relation to the space of female imaginary, and the particularity of female same-sex intimacy that has historically been produced by the cultural imposition of heterosexuality over the course of modern civilization, it is my belief that this female same-sex sentimentality deserved, if not required, a redefinition. I would like to coin it with a neologism of “sisterly same-sex sentiment,” in which “sisterly” reflects its role of helping the young female survive the transitional stage from a kin-inflected position to institutional society, and at the same time, “same-sex,” reserves the possibility of going beyond the heterosexual confines – an embodiment of the fluidity of the female imaginary, and “sentiment,” ultimately, renders the refined feeling that has historically been characterized as feminine. This sisterly same-sex sentiment is initially developed as a non-erotic psychologically intimacy between young females

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<sup>19</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 132.

in the transitional stage from familial kinship bonding to institutional mediation while preserving the possibility of going beyond the political and cultural confinements of heterosexuality with its dynamic interplay with the development of other categories in humanity, and thereby become a possible force to undermine the mechanics of masculine Oneness from within. I devote this study to investigating the significance of the role of sisterly same-sex sentiment in the course of female maturation, as well as the social stakes in which it is discursively constructed as a performative force in the long course of shaping the characteristics of women.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Republican Era: A Legend in Memory

Everywhere in the workings of memory we discover a secret compulsion to repetition. And when we turn to consider repetition itself, we discover that only through memory is repetition possible...

Our repetitions are the scars of some incompleteness, of imperfection: something in our lives stutters. Something is not content simply to be and to have been, but must try to be again and again, and never successfully and finally.

...

In their personal repetitions writers often repeat the old stories of the civilization; something unresolved in their own past finds an echoing chorus in the more distant past. We, in our turn, may find ourselves drawn into the trance of their repetitions, discovering that for us as well these stories have not ended so finally that we can set them aside as childish things and have done with them. A compulsion to repetition is the engine at the core of human civilizations: faces, details, circumstances are changed to drive new creatures through archaic plot.

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Although a story may be told from a memory, a memory is not a story; a memory may be the occasion for much brooding and reflection, but a memory is not thought in the ordinary sense. They say a memory is something like a visual image in the mind, but if it is, it is not the same as an image in our eyes. An image in our eyes has a background of detail and continuity with the living world; in our memory this background blurs, and certain forms rise up, forms in which are concentrated story and significance and unique problems of value. A memory is a broken shard out of the past; it intrudes into the ongoing present and commands our attention: we “dwell on it.”...<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I am citing Owen's interpretation on the form of memory in relation to literature as an overall idea of my dissertation revolving around the period of the early twentieth-century as not only a contextual construction for the foundation of modern Chinese literature, but also a repeated constitutive topos for the elite literature in the 1980s and the 1990s, as well as for a considerable number of contemporary popular cultural productions. It was the historical stage on which the heroines in this dissertation developed a non-erotic same-sex sentiment with full consciousness of homosexuality that had been fabricated as abnormal; it has aroused a constant nostalgia of modern civilization, through which Chinese women writers have been looking for a legacy of their own voices, and at the same time, reluctantly designated a disposition of romanticism; it is the social context in which Chinese intellectuals have been able to have a conversation with their unsolved incompleteness in quest of Chinese modernity. Owen's argument for memory has well interpreted the contextual role of the Republican era in the shaping of modern Chinese literature, in particular women-centered literature. See Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 99-102.

The decades of the 1920s and the 1930s are best remembered as a legend in the history of modern Chinese literature. Literature was greatly embedded into the progress of history, and vice versa. The interacted-ness between these two great categories has been constantly (re)constructed over the tortuous course of Chinese modernization and has finally arrived at today's image of the Republican era, in which the New Woman has been foregrounded as the heroine of the legend. It's from the Republican era that a relatively new literary theme – sisterly sentiment – has widely emerged, in particular, in the female-authored works revolving around female development. The theme of the female-female relationship is not rare in classical Chinese literature, and it even plays a fundamentally significant role in some texts, such as *Romance of the Western Chamber* 西厢记, or the well-known masterpiece, *Dream of the Red Chamber* 红楼梦. The difference between the two, however, is quite essential in terms of the context as well as the heroines. All of the external factors – social institutions, political regimes, cultural traditions and value systems – shape the context in which a story is created and received. The context, however, is nothing less than a discursive fabrication. It has been historically produced and re-produced in the form of documentation whenever we want to record it as the past, which, once named as such, lies only in memory. It's Owen's blurred "background" from which certain events, social formations and cultural values come up while de-selected others recede so that a unified understanding is produced by bridging or neglecting the gaps between the selections and the de-selections. It's also Butler's "power regimes" that naturalize the binary norms and further internalize them into

our consciousness. The context has become a discursive fabrication whenever we want to categorize or conclude to make a point, even if we consider it as contradictory, diverse, multiple, or variable. It is under this hypothesis that the Republican era in the modern history of China as the context of the literary theme of sisterly sentiment is going to be discussed in this study.

The most significant feature of the Republican era as the context of sisterly sentiment is the massive importation of western science, during which “sex” was categorized into the fields of physiology, psychology, and psychoanalysis as scientific knowledge. From the first translated book on psychology, *Xinling Xue* 心灵学, the Chinese version of Joseph Haven’s *Mental Philosophy: Including the Intellect, Sensibilities and Will*, published by Yan Yongjing in 1889, psychological and psychoanalysis theories, as well as related criticisms, were introduced to China through translation and were widely known to the public.<sup>21</sup> This led to several social consequences. First, for thousands of years, “sex” for the first time left its shameful position in the domestic life and become speakable in public life. Sex was authorized as a scientific identity in terms of people’s health, which legitimated its public expression; on the other hand, a set of new terminology of sexuality was invented or borrowed from the Japanese by translators, making sex formally presentable. Second, the scientification of sexuality on the basis of evolutionary theories promoted a transition from sexual morality to sexual normativity, which further consolidated the binary framework of sex and gender by creating a notion of abnormality regarding homosexuality. Moreover, the fact that Freudian theories placed more emphasis on the

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<sup>21</sup> See Jingyuan Zhang, *Psychoanalysis in China: Literary Transformations 1919-1949* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1992), 13-55.



importance of sexual factors in social organization stimulated modernist writers to make a serious attempt to render sex-related inward activities, such as Ding Ling's *Sophie*.

The development of western education systems in big cities in early twentieth-century China is another important feature in terms of the way that the Republican era performed a contextual function for the literary theme of sisterly sentiment. The establishment of school systems effected a transition for women to take leave of their kin-defined positions to become socially active through formative urban institutions. A transitional identity, *nǚ xuesheng* 女学生 (girl student), appeared as a new social identity for women who were allowed to leave domestic confinements and stepped up onto the social stage by attending schools. The emergence of the New Woman, along with social transformations in the modern era, posited a sequence in the rise of women writers as well as flourishing representations of female development, in which the theme of sisterly same-sex sentiment played a large role. It is most likely in the transitional stage of *nǚ xuesheng* that a selected figure became a sisterly relative to a young female in institutional society, and the sisterly same-sex sentimental intimacy between the two helped her go through the transition from being a girl student to being in a heterosexual marriage which was encoded as a symbol of being a “mature” woman. At the same time, the school system conveyed the notion of heterosexuality as a normal and licit relationship by organizing school in terms of sex, and further strengthened this notion through everyday supervision and pedagogy, what Foucault called “the internal discourse of the institution.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage

It is in such a context that the New Women – our heroines of sisterly sentiment – appeared in literary representations. Hu Ying investigated the figuration of woman in relation to the anxiety of modernity by analyzing popular novels created in the period from the last decade of Qing to the eve of the May Fourth movement. She pointed out that the New Woman “cannot be completely original or even coherent, but instead must bear contradictory traces of her many antecedents as well as hints of her descendants.”<sup>23</sup> The New Woman, in fact, emerged from a hybridization of a traditional talented woman as her domestic other, and a western woman as her foreign other.<sup>24</sup> The literary images of the New Women, therefore, indeed bear some traces of the female figures in classical Chinese literature. Regarding the theme of sisterly sentiment, however, a big difference from the mistress-maid relationship in classical Chinese literature is that sisterly sentiment plays a vital role in a woman’s social recasting that starts from her transitional stage at school and goes as far as her lifelong developmental trajectory, while the master-maid sentiment is a relationship strictly confined within the familial structure, and more importantly, in the hierarchical system. The sisterly figure in the relationship of sisterly same-sex sentiment functions as an ideal image in Lacan’s mirror to bring out a female subject by stirring up her transformation through psychological projection. Two young females in this sisterly relationship are socially and economically equal while psychologically dependent on each other.

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Books, 1990), 28. Foucault challenged the conventional belief of sexuality and argued that sexuality of children and young people was not simply repressed or forbidden; rather, educational provision was preoccupied with sex, and sexuality was directly expressed through surveillance and intervention.

<sup>23</sup> Ying Hu, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-19.

There is apparently no such equality between a young master and her maid, who would never get a chance to pursue a life like the “sisterly” figure.

In the study of sisterly same-sex sentiment, one more significance of the Republican era, together with the images of the New Woman, is its constant reconstruction through repetition in modern Chinese literature. In the long quotation at the beginning of this chapter, Owen explored the relation between “the past” and “the present” in the form of memory in the narratives of Chinese classical literature by analyzing Shen Fu’s *A Drifting Life* (Fu sheng liu ji 浮生六记) as an example of the genre of the memoir. What he said is in fact quite true for contemporary stories that are set with the context of the Republican era as a backdrop, such as Wang Anyi’s *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (Chang hen ge 长恨歌), Yan Geling’s *The Flowers of War* (Jinling Shisan Chai 金陵十三钗), and Ye Zhaoyan’s *Nanjing 1937: A Love Story* (Yijiusanjiu nian de aiqing 一九三七年的爱情). Writers like to “repeat the old stories of the civilization,” not only in their personal memoirs. They are looking for the scars of incompleteness in the old stories of the civilization; they are presenting the anxiety of the imperfect present through the more distant past. In this way, the Republican era has become a legend that lives in people’s imagination, based on memory. The modernist writers built up a memory for the future through documentation, upon which contemporary authors are able to view the past in retrospect, through imagination. The Republican era has “intruded into the ongoing present and commands our attention: we ‘dwell on it.’”

### **Lu Yin and Her Romanticism of Sisterly Community**

The novella *Haibin Guren* 海滨故人 (Old Acquaintances at the Seashore) was written in the 1920s by Lu Yin, a talented New Woman who has gained recognition for her intensive writings about friendship among young females. The story shows an episode of female development through the psychological and physiological transformation of five young female students who are undergoing a transition from being aspiring New Women in the May Fourth era to being about to enter the predetermined stage of heterosexual marriage. In the story, sisterly sentimentality is invested with a complexity of the fixity of woman's domestic roles and the uncertainty of her social roles, as well as the imagination of a life-long female community. As a representative literary text that devoted major attention to the theme of sisterly same-sex sentiment, the story presents some distinct features that typify this subject with the zeitgeist of the Republican era – first and foremost, a disposition towards romance and its complicity with de-politicized narratives. I use *Romance* here to denote an interpersonal sentimental ideal that is detached from any political, social, and economic urgency in the contemporary context. It is a subjective feeling created by a textual focus shift – urban atmosphere, talking heart-to-heart, leisure mood, and anxiety over triviality – and has nothing to do with gender roles and sexual intimacy. In other words, romance by no means suggests any notion of either heterosexual relation or homoerotic desire, that is, *love* – an excessively used word that has wide implications; rather, romance is a hybridity constituted of western thoughts, progressive ideas, and a search for the self in the mode of de-politicization, particularly in the context of the Republican era. In the text of “Old Acquaintances at the Seashore,” the disposition of romance is first engendered by

the wording right from the very beginning, through the heroines' names. The story starts with a description of the beautiful scenery at dusk by the seashore, where the heroines make their debut with a very modern title, *nǚlang* 女郎, given that the word 'modern,' as a new coinage in its Chinese variation, 'modeng 摩登,' entails a unified understanding of fashion, urban life, and westernized culture in a new social system. The wording at once defines a romantic keynote for the whole text and de-politicizes this female community.

In the May Fourth era, it is reasonable to assume that students had become the most energetic force of various political activities. In "Old Acquaintances at the Seashore," however, the heroines were neither young revolutionaries nor enthusiastic activists showing passionate patriotism in student movements. They were young girl students who even felt that these political activities that caused a series of student strikes disturbed their normal coursework at school. More importantly, their upset wasn't generated from their indifference to politics. They simply believed they weren't ready for the stage of getting into society, which is clearly revealed by Lingyu's words: "We're now students, not carrying huge responsibilities, yet still subjected to all kinds of conditions. Engaging with society in the future, wouldn't we become more mechanical?"<sup>25</sup> It clearly implies there are stages in the process of female development and that these girls were now in the transitional stage of being students without much social responsibility to becoming social individuals who were capable of agency through social practice and devotion

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<sup>25</sup> Yin Lu, *Ren Sheng Xiao Shuo* 人生小说 (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1994), 66-67. I am using my own translation here.

into social change. The narrative later reveals that the heroines started their heterosexual relations in quick succession. In this sense, the text also implies an ambiguous incompatibility of a woman's domestic role and her social development.

In addition, the heroines' anxiety over their social roles in the near future went together with a sentimental depression caused by romantic love, though they were studying at college and were supposed to be pursuing a professional life. Zongying's parents arranged a marriage for her to a young bureaucrat who would have a bright future, in her father's view. She questioned that if she eventually had to be subordinated to her parents' will, why should she go to college rather than continuing to live like a rich girl – getting up at noon, doing some light reading, making hackneyed poems, thinking of those scholar-beauty stories, and keeping in mind the Confucian conception of the three obediences and four virtues – so that she would be happy to follow whatever her parents said? The heroines therefore were trapped in a social ambivalence caused by the parallel progresses of modernity and women's liberation. Heidegger interpreted the essence of modernity as a world picture – world becomes picture – in which man becomes the subject to be represented rather than determined – “The being of beings is sought and found in the representedness of beings.”<sup>26</sup> As humanity had freed itself from the bonds created by God as the highest cause, the modern age introduced subjectivism and individualism. The liberation of humanity transformed the focus from a God-determined world into a doctrine of man as such.

China went through social chaos in the first half of the twentieth century as a whole, while the

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, eds. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 68.

time period from the May 4th Movement in 1919 until full-scale war broke out in 1937 distinguished itself with a particular concern about the missing self in a temporary collapse of masculinity and a rising of the New Woman. In this sense, the liberation of Chinese women began with the most significant social transformation and thereby underwent all the impacts from cultural heterogeneity, reorganization of social institutions, urgency of national reform, and anxiety over foreign invasion. As an emerging subject stepping out of the confinement of kinship and the Confucian code of ethics, and at the same time standing at the intersection with the Otherness of man, tradition, and the West, the Chinese New Woman endeavored to build up the self through psychological reconstruction as well as through institutional participation, while the society at the time was far from being prepared for such demands. Consequently, questions such as “What are we going to do after finishing school?”, “What do we live for?”, and “What is life ultimately?”, just like the anxieties throughout the narrative in *Old Acquaintances at Seashore*, haunted and annoyed the New Woman a great deal. Most New Women would have to go back to their domestic roles. That is to say, even though women greatly benefited from the progress of modernity, women’s liberation, as a symbol of the liberation of the weak, the poor, and the underprivileged, and an imperative for the construction of modernity,<sup>27</sup> was still all along subjected to the dominance of the masculine discourse, along with the historical context of Chinese society at the time. The unprepared society became an external element that forced the

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<sup>27</sup> Helen H. Chen, “Gender, Subjectivity, Sexuality: Defining a Subversive Discourse in Wang Anyi’s Four Tales of Sexual Transgression” in *China in a Polycentric World: Essays in Chinese Comparative Literature*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 90.

New Women to return to the institution of traditional womanhood – the domestic roles of being daughters, wives and mothers. On the other hand, the anxieties and psychological struggles over the uncertainty about the future constitute the main body of sisterly sentiment, in addition to those worries caused by romantic love, which have even more influence on the construction of the self.

It is indeed true that, through the romantic discourse of free love in the May Fourth, young intellectuals freed themselves from the constraint of Confucian ethical codes, which gave shape to the formation of the self. Meanwhile, it is also a demonstration of a gender strategy by which women have been assimilated into the grand narratives of modern progress and nation building. In particular, given that a woman is relegated to a more passive position in an arranged marriage, her benefits from the freedom of marriage have been naturally emphasized. Consequently, a woman's real needs in such a new environmental complex – the May Fourth obsession with everything new – are still neglected. As Rey Chow pointed out, "What is required goes beyond pointing out that women's issues are consistently being elided or normalized under 'bigger' concerns such as reform and revolution."<sup>28</sup> In her analysis of women's images in Ding Ling's fiction, Tani Barlow wrote, "*Nǚxing* characters often find it difficult to take things directly, even at those rare moments when they know what it is they really want,"<sup>29</sup> and using Sophie's words in her diary 'I want something, but I'm not willing to go and take it. I must find a tactic that gets

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<sup>28</sup> Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 51-52.

<sup>29</sup> Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 137.



it offered to me voluntarily.’ Barlow attributed this “physical indirectness” of Ding Ling’s *nǚxing* characters – as a reflection and a representation of the New Woman of the day – to “the social chaos outside them in the world at large” and “the stubborn incoherence of their own personalities,” the social condition as an external factor and the weakness in the internal structure of feminine personality. As a result, “they simply cannot take what they want even under the very best circumstances.”<sup>30</sup> While women indeed feature psychological sophistication and physical passivity, this “stubborn incoherent personality” is nonetheless an absolute cultural construction. In the case of the Chinese New Woman emerging in the May Fourth period, although the intellectual discourse – a temporarily declining yet still dominant masculinity in terms of gender principle – made an effort to create a monolithic image of women in the past as ignorant so that women could be politically assimilated into the iconoclastic movement, and women’s image could depart from the past and be easily replaced by a new monolithic one, the New Women were in fact by no means completely and extremely “new.” They were very learned in Chinese classics, modern science, and foreign literature – they were indeed a hybrid agency of domestic tradition, modern autonomy and western education.

Having been freed from the family-based oppression of complying to Confucian ethical and ritual rules, New Women showed a strong eagerness for becoming social subjects by taking part in various social institutions and activities, yet after entering college or even working in the very limited positions that were offered to women, such as teachers and nurses, they would eventually

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 138.

find that the issue of marriage was constantly at stake. Gail Hershatter provided an interdisciplinary survey on the scholarly research concerning Chinese women in the entanglement of the categories of marriage, family, sexuality, gender, labor, and national modernity, and pointed out that the May Fourth discourse of self-building and individual fulfillment “were implicitly addressed to the problems of male individuals, while women were expected to strengthen both the family and the state through their reproductive and domestic labor.”<sup>31</sup> This gendered hierarchy latently underlies the slogan of women’s liberation, making women’s voice constantly subject to the grand narrative of the national modernity represented by the dominant masculine discourse, and finally goes as far as the revolutionary sisterhood in the total mobilization of nation salvation. From the May Fourth period through the 1930s, the parallel of the public appeal for gender equality and the actual gendered division of labor resulted in a dilemma in which women were trapped, in a suture stitching the private and the public, the past and the future, the tradition and the modern. To be more specific, it was a dilemma upon which the solid boundary of the domestic sphere had been dissolved in a way that family was written into modernity as a social institution – “the site of modern urban consumption, the cornerstone of economic health, and the place where women contributed to the nation by creating a comfortable and nurturing environment for husband and children.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, the masculine discourse, in the name of modernity, made the family a social institution by

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<sup>31</sup> Gail Hershatter, *Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: Global, Area, and International Archive, University of California Press, 2007), 88.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

means of liberating women from total imprisonment by Confucian ethics to the extent that they might freely take part in social institutions and activities only before marriage, as a sign of the stage of maturity in female development, which reinforced marriage as a great watershed in the process of female maturation. In examining their private matters and problems that the heroines of the story discussed with and confided in each other, which constituted the main body of sisterly sentimental intimacy, I would argue that, given the consistent dominance of masculine discourse and the dramatically changing social conditions of the day, there was in fact no “very best circumstances” at all for women. The vagueness regarding the future that women faced after their debut on the social stage – if we consider the school system to be a power mechanism for training disciplined bodies – was in fact the process of a transitory searching and construction of the self through social recasting.

### **Ding Ling and Her Literary “Sisters”**

#### ***Miss Sophie’s Diary: An Absence***

As a work that brings renown to Ding Ling for its boldness of the textual representations of the female body, erotic desire, and sexuality, *Miss Sophie’s Diary* 莎菲女士日记 has been appraised, criticized and sublimed through literary and social critiques in the course of Chinese modernization. Tani Barlow provides an elaborate analysis of Ding Ling’s writing and proposes that, in her early works addressing “sexual drives and natural selection in relation to the feminine character,” the Sophie figures present a constant instability and a failure to pull the self together in that the desire of a female subject for a male object is strong but tentative. This “heterosexual

dynamics' tentativeness and the instable ethics of heterosexual sociality," as Barlow suggests, produce a category of womanhood, in opposition to revolutionary activism, that is "reduced, regretful, self-absorbed, self-pitying and privatized." For women living in the binary mechanism of heterosexuality, who "take men as their desired object and take other women for their erotic ideal" – a feature of Ding Ling's women characters – there's a universal personality of instability or deficiency.<sup>33</sup> Also focusing on the romantic relationship between Sophie and an overseas Chinese man, Ling Jishi, Haiyan Lee starts her discussion from the very last entry of the diary, and raises the question of the moral code of romantic idealism. Sophie's finally terminating her relationship with Ling Jishi, according to Lee, was not simply because of her scorn for such a playboy, but should be understood in relation to the bourgeois ideology of the day and the characteristics of the heroines in Ding Ling's later fiction. What Sophie denounces is not a superficial man who disgusts her, but the entire world of ordinary life dominated by the bourgeois ideology that the man represents, which renders the "radically shifting moral frameworks of her times."<sup>34</sup> Barlow places emphasis on women's affliction caused by the cultural imposition of heterosexuality, while Lee gives particular attention to the moral liability that is carried by (the absence of) romantic love – both focusing on how women struggle to build up the self in relations between opposite sexes. Given the already existing thorough attention to the gender oppression naturalized by modern norms and the actual significance of female same-

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<sup>33</sup> See Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 132-150.

<sup>34</sup> Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 123-5.

sex relations in the textual representations of *Miss Sophie's Diary*, as well as in Ding Ling's other fiction, I would like to re-examine the role of "heterosexual binary" and "morality," as two elements of Butler's "power regime," in the sentimentality between the same sex, and its interplay with the development of women's subjectivity.

Closely linked with Ding Ling's vicissitudes in her nearly 50-year political life, the fiction reflects the dominant discourse in different historical contexts by its marginal position, much the same as the theme of sisterly sentiment in the diary, which has never been examined as a main value in comparison to the big issues of body, sexuality, eroticism, and subjectivity. The thematic importance of sisterly sentiment in the narrative can be traced to as early as the second entry, "December 28," in which Sophie invited her female friend, Yufang, to the cinema but got so angry because Yufang asked another friend, Jianru, along. Sophie had once wanted to be a close friend with Jianru and had written her eight letters in a single week, but Jianru didn't reply at all. Sophie felt her self-dignity was greatly hurt. This unhappy trifle in the past made Sophie furious at the cinema and she left early. The next entry continued by saying that Jianru became ill because of Sophie's unpleasantness. The short narration of the past and the consequent psychological entanglement with the present show a primary feature of sisterly sentiment, which is, different from the grandiosity of political sisterhood, often embodied in a thoroughly feminine form – slender, tender, delicate and mild – a small trifle can have a far greater impact on female psychology by generating endless subjective imaginings. Woman however precisely recognizes the self in the way that she holds onto the trivial matters that continue to haunt her mind until the

consciousness of self-dignity emerges onto the surface from the state of disturbance and at the same time sublimates into a full notion of the self. Like Sophie's best friend in childhood, Jianru in fact functioned as an imaginary ideal with whom Sophie was eager to develop an intimate sisterly relationship. The narrative seems to insinuate that, for young females, there's a particular psychological position constantly leaving for an intimate same-sex friend, who may even be traced back as early as childhood – the period of sexual latency, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, when “orientation of interests, games and play activities enter a homosexual phase in which friendship ties to one's own sex grow strong and often involve an exclusion of the opposite sex.”<sup>35</sup> – and can be replaced by other females due to the changing living environment. Distinguished from general friendship, this intimate same-sex relation reserved for a sisterly figure outside the kinship bond of the familial structure is nonetheless selected within the power regime of patriarchy, and more importantly, heterosexuality; consequently, it is by no means a fact that females are born to such same-sex intimacy even though it usually starts from an early age, and on the other hand, there's no erotic inclination at all from the very beginning. A following question that naturally arises would be why men are less likely to develop a one-to-one non-erotic relationship: we are still falling into the trap of the gender binary within the heterosexual matrix by dealing with such a question. Not defining the self as the Otherness of man, woman in fact selects a same-sex parameter as a panoramic ideal for the course of life from a very early age to initiate the process of self-identification. Erikson's inner-bodily space theory,

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<sup>35</sup> Rolf E. Muuss, *Theories of Adolescence* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 32.

having been a controversial construct and the target of feminist criticism on account of its ignorance of gender differences, nonetheless interprets the formation of woman's identity as a development of sexual values and standards and a decision of "whether, when, under what circumstances, and whom to permit entry into her 'Inner Space.'"<sup>36</sup> If we contort the materiality of Erikson's bodily space into a mental one, it is precisely the selected same-sex figure that is allowed to enter into the "inner space," and at the same time starts the social formation of woman's identity.

How does a woman make this decision, or, what are the criteria by which the sisterly figure is selected? By examining various literary representations of sisterly sentiment, we will find that the selection has been greatly interfered with by the mechanics of the modern state apparatus. First of all, the modern institution of education at the same time provides and limits the site where young females develop an intimate same-sex relation, and therefore sisterly sentiment is closely, if not exclusively, associated with the image of educated women, indicating a reorganization of women based on modern institutions rather than kin-inflected hierarchy. By rendering Sophie's anxiety over love and eroticism in the short form of a diary, Ding Ling delineated a panoramic picture of romanticism among girl students, and the main "bodies" constitute sisterly sentiment in the Republican era, as well as literary images in the social backdrop of the Republican era. As an initial form of the Chinese New Woman, girl students embodied a new identity, at the same time feminine and political. They were docile bodies

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 76.

ideologically operated and corrected by the great cultural collision in which sexuality was introduced as a disciplinary category of scientific knowledge with the authority of western modernity. These bodies were further mechanically consolidated and implemented by the school system as an organic space of the modern anatomy of power. The young females of the day were liberated from the confinement of familial kinship, but at the same time, they entered another system of enclosure that was built not only on the basis of the social hierarchy, but also in terms of gender. Consequently, they would follow a different set of principles and disciplines that were automatically regulated by the power regime of the modern state. Resistance to oppression will happen only if a social institution has been transformed and re-organized into a new one in which the domination of the old principles have been greatly challenged and finally collapsed and replaced by the new orders, and in the meanwhile, has had another round of internalization initiated. School, as a fundamental social institution in the modern era, is a site in which discipline individualizes bodies by distributing and circulating them in a network of relations.<sup>37</sup>

In the context of the Republican era, this network of relations is primarily same-sex. On the other hand, school is also in complicity with the manipulation of the dominant ideology so that it can be operated effectively under supervision. With the onset of the forced assimilation into the progress of modernity, China presented certain distinct characteristics of modern society, in which sexuality was granted the seriousness of science and medicine by being assigned into the binary matrix of normal and abnormal, licit and illicit, healthy and morbid, and further sublimed

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<sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 146.



onto the full level of truth. In other words, sex has made a departure from the material body to the process of socialization. The masculine and political investments of the female body secure both the masculinity of the dominant discourse in the temporary collapse of the patriarchal system through a negotiation of sexual difference and the progress to modernity with gender strategy by foregrounding women onto the historical stage. As Foucault pointed out, “sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth.”<sup>38</sup> The interplay of truth and sex has been captured and well illustrated in many Republican literary writings, in particular in *Miss Sophie's Diary*. Sophie's confession of her erotic desire for Ling Jishi reached a climax in the very last entry:

“But I admire him, long for him, and without him I'll lose everything that ensures my life's meaning. I always thought that if one day our lips were to join close, close together I'd cheerfully let my body go to pieces with the wild joy of my heart. Indeed, I'd have sacrificed everything just for a caress from that knight of a man and the casual touch of his fingertips anywhere on my body.

...

But although I was secretly mocking him I forgot about everything when he boldly and rapidly put his arms round me. I temporarily lost my self-respect and pride, completely bewitched by the charm that's the only thing he has. In my heart all I could think was, 'Tighter. Longer. I'm leaving tomorrow.' If I'd had any self-control then I'd have thought of the other things besides his beauty and thrown him outside like a stone.

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In short, I've ruined myself. How in heaven's name am I going to avenge and make up

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<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 56.

for all my losses when I'm my own enemy?

Fortunately my life is mine alone in all the universe to play with. I've already wasted enough of it. It doesn't seem to be a matter of any importance that this experience has thrown me into the very depths of grief."<sup>39</sup>

In the course of Sophie's confession throughout the diary, erotic love is closely associated with the seriousness of the themes of life, death and the self. Sexuality finds a new position in language, in which it has become something that can be articulated in serious literature other than pornography. Given the particularity of confession, in which the speaking subject is the same person as the subject of the statement, it is apt to be considered a form of producing truth. Consequently, confession has become the intersection where sex and truth are joined, and upon which sex is transformed into discourse. The popularity of the diary as a literary form of confession signifies the upcoming of the modern era in that it provides an approach to seek the self in the vast openness of trivial matters in life, which at the same time guarantees the truth of the self. On the other hand, the notion of heterosexuality has been embedded as a built-in assumption for sexual relations, that is, to create an equation between heterosexuality and truth. This medical classification unveiled the myth of sexuality by putting it in another process of mythologization in complicity with scientific discourse. In many literary works involving the sentimentality of young females in the Republican era, it seems that women are willing to keep an intimate same-sex relation for life, which is forcibly interrupted by heterosexual marriage. The confrontation between same-sex intimacy and heterosexual romanticism nonetheless causes

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<sup>39</sup> Ling Ding, *Miss Sophie's Diary*, trans. W. J. F. Jenner (Panda Books, 1985), 61-64.

suspicion if the relationship between the two involves homoeroticism to a certain extent, while its significance in the development of self-identification and subjectivity is neglected. In the diary, the strategy of the ambiguous introduction of Sophie's emotion to sister Yun indicates the writer's notion of the abnormality of same-sex eroticism:

“[16 January] Today I had a letter from Yun in Shanghai that has plunged me even deeper into despair. I could find no words with which to comfort her. ‘My life and my love are useless to me now,’ she wrote. So she has less need than ever for consolation from me and the tears I shed for her. I can guess from her letter what her life has been like since her marriage, even though she won’t tell me in as many words. Why does God have to play such cruel tricks on people in love? Yun is highly strung and very passionate. Of course she wouldn’t be able to stand that gradual cooling, or a lack of feeling that can no longer be concealed. I wish she’d come to Beijing, but is it possible? I doubt it.

[4 March] It’s twenty days since I had the cable about Yun’s death, but my health has been improving daily...

[21 March, night] What a life I was living this time last year. I used to stay in bed pretending to be ill and refusing to get up to make Yun care for me and do just what I wanted. To make her caress me I exploited the desperate and unconsolable tears that flowed when I laid my head on the table, thinking of trivial upsets and sobbing aloud. Sometimes I’d be feeling rather sad after a whole day of silent thought, and this pale melancholy would make me more eager than ever to stir up that sort of emotion. It was almost as if I could taste a little sweetness that way. Now I can’t even bear to think of listening to Yun lying on the grass in the French park at night and singing *The Peony Pavilion*. If she hadn’t been tricked by God into loving that pasty-faced man she’d never have died so early and of course I’d never have drifted to Beijing by myself to struggle against disease without relatives or love. Although I’ve got several friends and they’re very sorry for me, can my relationship with them be set on the scales against the love between me and Yun? When I think of Yun I really ought to let go and weep aloud the way I used to when I was acting the spoiled child for her.”<sup>40</sup>

“[22 March] My mind’s in turmoil, but I’ve forced myself to write this diary. I started it because Yun kept on asking me to in letters, over and over again. Although Yun has been dead for a long time now I couldn’t bear to give up writing it. I suppose it must be that because of the very serious advice she gave me when she was alive I want to go on writing it

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 50.

for ever in her memory. So no matter how little I feel like writing I force myself to scribble half a page or so. I was already in bed, but the sight of Yun's picture on the wall was more than I could bear. I dragged myself out of bed and started writing this to spare myself the agony of yearning for her. Of course, the only person I've ever have shown this diary to was Yun.

...

If my dear Yun were still alive to read my diary I know she'd have embraced me, wept and said, 'Sophie, my Sophie, why can't I be a bit greater so as to spare my Sophie all this grief?' But Yun is dead. If only I could weep bitterly with this diary in my hands."<sup>41</sup>

These are the only sections that mention Yun throughout the diary. The author has no intention of providing a portrayal of sister Yun. There are almost no accounts of her personality traits except for a very brief introduction in the first mention of Yun, who is "highly strung and very passionate." When Sophie mentioned her again in the diary, we learn that Yun had had an unhappy marriage, and she had died. The narrative may insinuate causality between her marriage and her death in this way. It is not until the last mentions of sister Yun in the entries on the night of March 21 and on March 22 that we find out that Yun was such a significant sisterly figure for Sophie and that the whole diary was in fact written for her, the only person that Sophie believed fully understood her and whom she wanted to show this diary. While we view with suspicion the intimate relationship between the two when Sophie remembered her life in the last year when Yun was around, the narrative reveals that the reason that Sophie forced herself to continue to write the diary even though Yun had been dead for a long time is because Yun gave her very serious advice for life when she was alive. The intimacy between them – the physical caress and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 52-54.

the psychological indispensability – therefore has no allusion to homosexual eroticism at all, but is a representation of sisterly intimacy standing on the border of familial kinship, towards the modernity of institutionalized society. That is, it is a variation of kinship-based emotion generated on account of psychological dependence in an institutionalized society, yet without any reference to the conception of the modern classification of sexuality in terms of scientific discourse. It also reveals that a general notion of being aware of the abnormality of homoerotic relations has been embedded in the process of the author's writing. The sisterly figure helps the young female in transition from familial structure to modern society, and eventually goes back to her domestic roles in the institution of womanhood. The whole narrative has been overwhelmed by Sophie's confession of heterosexual eroticism while the mention of sister Yun is only minor episodes in the narrative. Likewise, heterosexual romanticism and marriage is the eternal theme for women's lives, while sisterly sentimental intimacy takes the form of scattered fragments in memory. Nonetheless, this intimacy plays a key role in the character formation and the development of a woman's subjectivity by performing the function of assisting the young female to enter the stage of social self-identification so that she can voice for herself as a subject, as sister Yun gave important advice to Sophie, to which Sophie looked for the self in her confession by writing this diary. It is therefore the absence or inaccessibility of sister Yun that keeps Sophie trapped in her emotional struggles. It seems as if Sophie lacks certain guidance exclusively from sisterly sentimental intimacy to deliver her into the next stage of heterosexual relations. Sophie therefore becomes alone only in the sense of the absence of Yun's irreplaceable sisterly

sentiment.

In brief, the sisterly same-sex relationship is primarily non-erotic and limited to a division of the social hierarchy; moreover, it reinforces the mechanics of heterosexuality as well as the system of social hierarchy. The patriarchal force has been running all the while and therefore it is still within the institution of womanhood. Psychologically, adolescent girls are undergoing a period of great paradox – on one hand, they want to become independent from their families; on the other hand, they need to become connected with their peers. Studies show that during adolescence, girls are trying to maintain connections and relationships while developing a sense of autonomy.<sup>42</sup> The sisterly figure emerges from general friendships – most likely same-sex peer groups – as a solution in this transitional stage, to help the young female mediate the paradox. The life trajectory of the sisterly figure – from a girl student to a married woman with the domestic roles of wife and mother – throws light on the young female to the extent that she would like to take it as a fixed image of her own future.

### ***Sui Mu: The Variety of Female-Female Relations – Is There a Nature?***

*Sui Mu* 岁暮 (The End of Year) is a very short story that focuses on the sisterly same-sex sentiment between the two heroines Peifang and Hunying, which seems similar to the sentimental intimacy between sister Yun and Sophie in many aspects. Considering the specificity of the historical context and Ding Ling, as a gifted woman writer, her involvement in patriotic movements, it's always reasonable to give a political reading for such a short story titled "The

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<sup>42</sup> Rolf E. Muuss, *Theories of Adolescence* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 204.

End of Year,” as the heroine Peifang mentions she is determined to be of rationality in the new year – a metaphor for the transformation of Chinese society in the modern era, the text per se is more likely to present same-sex interpersonal emotion in certain episode of sentimental development in the process of female maturation though.

The text goes straight to the theme of female-female relation from the very beginning: “She shouted delightfully: ‘Sister Hun! Sister Hun!’ Hunying walked out from the next door towards her: ‘Awake? It’s past ten o’clock. Time to get up! I’ve already done a lot.’ She kissed her on the cheek.”<sup>43</sup> It is nevertheless not the physical intimacy – a kiss – that assures homoerotic bonds; rather, it’s the incompatibility of heterosexual love with the female-female relation that invokes suspicion of the ambiguous relation between the two. That Hunying wrote a letter to her boyfriend really darkened Peifang’s mood in Spring Festival Eve. Regarding Hunying the closest of friends, Peifang’s emotional reaction – a complexity of oversensitivity, angeriness, resentment, grievance, and sadness – seems going beyond the normal response in common friendship when young females share secrets. She is apparently unkind to Hunying’s romantic relationship with Xin, and Hunying’s prevarication about her contact with boyfriend also assures this. Sharing love letter is a common plot in the texts centers on sisterly sentimental intimacy developed upon psychological projection, as the most stark evidence demonstrating there are no secrets with each other, it yet has become a textual detail to judge the nature of the relation, if there’s one, between

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<sup>43</sup> Ling Ding, *Ding Ling Quanjī* 丁玲全集 (Shijiazhuang Shi: Hebei Renmin Chubanshe, 2001), 211. I am using my own translation here.

the two young females. Sometimes the man – a prospective partner with whom one of young females is very possible to be married in the near future – simply become the main topic of their intimate conversations, his family background, career pursuit, or even making jokes about him, upon which the young female will be finally led to heterosexual marriage; while it would naturally raise reader's suspicion of a homosexual inclination when she tends to be excessively negative or neurotic in response to any form of her same-sex friend's heterosexual intimacy, such as Peifang's hysteria to Hunying's romantic relation with Xin. That the incompatibility of same-sex sisterly sentiment and heterosexual romanticism immediately invokes uneasiness or even a suspicion of homosexuality is in fact simply a product of the normalization of the binary framework of gender and its consequent bondage of heterosexuality. As the romanticism between the opposite sexes has been institutionally fixed into patterns and routes – emotional attachment, physical intimacy, and nuclear family in the form of marriage and kids, the configuration of the relationships between the same sex has also been imaginatively framed with constraints that believed exclusive to heterosexual romanticism. In other words, in the institutionalized system of modern society, same-sex relations were neither originally born nor able to freely develop on her own initiative, but stemmed from the whole cultural regime of heterosexuality as a negation. In result, acts of physical intimacy – kissing, hugging, sleeping on the same bed – have become highly sensitive factors excessive to same-sex relations, and its possible appearance has become a constant absence.

A homoerotic desire seems increasingly being repudiated as the narrative unfolds. The



narrative later reveals what made Peifang sad was not that Hunying developed a romantic relationship with man, but a fear of loneliness if Hunying, the sisterly figure, left her for marriage. It seemed she needed a soul mate as a mental dependence in institutionalized society, who apparently was not necessarily from the opposite sex. The text, through Peifang's words, mentions several times that both of them were away from home and only had each other to rely on spiritually. In this sense, this same-sex emotional attachment seems more like sisterly sentiment – a non-erotic sentimental intimacy between young females that goes beyond common friendship helps her go through the transition from domestic kinship into institutional society that fundamentally constructed by a dominance of heterosexual marriage. The story yet makes another turn at the end when Peifang's diary entry enunciates a determination of repression and being rational, which to the largest extent reveals a possibility of homosexual relation. She appealed herself to make an effort to improve the fragile rationality, and repress the ridiculous emotions, which seems to confirm her emotion to sister Hun goes beyond the control of rationality and the normal boundary of same-sex friendship. Given the modern implications of the terms such as rationality and repression, her appeal in the diary has suddenly stretched to a full imagination of abnormal psychology governed by scientific discourse of modernity. We now may consider the relation between Peifang and Hunying bears the potential to transform into female-female homosexuality, which also reminds a detail at the beginning of this very short story that Peifang was already thirty years old but hadn't been married yet, indicating Peifang might have different thoughts towards marriage, and on account of her intimate relation with

sister Hun – homosexual inclination becomes highly suspicious.

Yet again, we have been lured into the trap of the power hegemony of the discourse of sexuality in the modern era. Much in common with the situation that the incompatibility of heterosexual romanticism and same-sex sisterly sentiment under the mechanics of gender binary would inevitably result in a suspicion of homosexual eroticism, the cultural imposition of modernity has become another factor that disturbs our assessment of the same-sex relationship. Let's first simply make this same-sex relation plain. Peifang was a thirty-year old unmarried woman who studied in a college away from home. Hunying was of similar age as Peifang and it seemed she had no family and relatives. They had been known each other for two years and now lived with Shi family together. Hunying was developing a romantic relation with a man whose name is Xin. They mostly connected with each other by love letters. Peifang felt unhappy about Hunying's relation with him. She would have a bad mood every time when Hunying wrote Xin a letter or she got a message from him, while Hunying also felt sorry to Peifang for her love affair. But it seemed Peifang also helped sister Hun a lot for this romantic relation. On the day of Spring Festival Eve, they had a tiff in the morning when Peifang found Hunying wrote Xin a letter but felt hesitated to tell her. Hunying was invited to have a dinner with Yang family and Peifang felt very lonely in such a festival night. After finding some poems Hunying wrote on the back of Xin's photo, in which she poured out her strong emotion and love to Xin, Peifang finally decided to get rid of such sentimental indulgence with sister Hun. Detaching from the coded meaning of same-sex relation imposed by the institution of modernity and heterosexuality with

the authority of Democracy and Science, there seems no desire in relation to sexuality between Peifang and Hunying. Peifang's longing to stay with Hunying and her hysteria to Hunying's relation with Xin can simply be because of her anxiety over sister Hun's leaving for marriage. It's reasonable to speculate that it's highly possible that Peifang would eventually end up with heterosexual marriage. In this sense, Hunying precisely performs the function of sisterly figure, who helps the young female go through her transitional period and proceed towards the stage of marriage. It is therefore the incompatibility between heterosexual romanticism and same-sex relation escalates sisterly sentiment up to the same level of heterosexual marriage. At the meanwhile, the nature of this sentimental intimacy is called into question. What's more, it is the discourse of modernity encodes cultural implications to the conceptions such as reason and repression, so that a stigma of abnormality has been superimposed onto the same-sex relation. When we tend to believe female-female sentimental intimacy are highly possible to develop into homoerotic relation without the oppression from predominant heterosexual binary, here we find that some same-sex relation can also be completely non-erotic without the connotations derived from heterosexual hegemony. Our contemplation on the potential transformation of female same-sex relations – an immediate association with homosexuality – is precisely produced by the whole cultural hegemony of gender binary and its by-product heterosexuality. We have dropped into the center of the tricky whirlpool of the discourse of modernity when we're trying to escape from it. The self-fulfilling binarism reinforced by a clear boundary of normality authorized by medical science based on evolution theories impacts our evaluation to the variety of female-

female relationships. Consequently, that sisterly sentimental intimacy has been anyhow associated with sexuality as a negation of heterosexuality seems all but inevitable.

### ***Shujia Zhong (Summer Break): A Sheer Ambiguity in Female Community***

Ding Ling's *Shujia Zhong* 暑假中 (*Summer Break*) is another story centering on the life of female community consisting of seven young teachers in Wuling. The text shows a typical feature of same-sex friendship between young females in a highly ambiguous representation on the border between homosexual desire and sisterly sentiment. Similarities of such theme come up one after another – a homeless heroine demanding of psychological dependence, anxiety of loneliness, same-sex friendship ending up with heterosexual marriage, and same-sex physical intimacy.

There are however several highly suspicious markers indeed touch the edge of homosexual desire, making the story extremely ambiguous. First of all, language is of great significance to allow one to categorize the text into a homosexual story. The word “love” itself causes the most ambiguity in terms of the neologism revolving around sexuality in the Republican era, when western ideas were introduced into China as advanced knowledge and civilization through translation. Sex has been for the first time freed from its unspeakable identity and normalized into a kind of knowledge standing at the intersection of medical science and literary arts. In the process of the dissemination of western ideas about sexuality, Chinese new terms have been coined to sketch the boundary of heterosexual love as the center of human affection and at the same time make homosexual desire an “abnormal” form. The neologism “tongxing ai 同性爱”

was defined for same-sex love.<sup>44</sup> It is in this context that the literary texts were produced and received. Both writers and readers were highly sensitive to the same-sex relation as sexual perversion. As a result, representations of same-sex relation have been read with a strong notion of being potentially morbid or abnormal. Although “ai,” the word of “love” in Chinese, renders a wide range of meanings from Confucian benevolent love to interpersonal friendship, it primarily refers to romantic love assumed between the opposite sexes. The frequently repeated appearance of “ai” in the narrative raises reasonable suspicion that the relation between Chengshu and Jiaying has crossed the boundary of sisterly friendship.

Another feature makes this text distinguished from most of the stories centering on sisterly sentiment is the bold representation of physical intimacy between young females. From the very beginning, it has been pointed out that Jiaying was loved by Chengshu faithfully, who chose celibacy as life ideal, raising suspicion that her emotion to Jiaying might have something to do with her hesitation on marriage. The narrative continued with Zhiqing’s sardonic comments on the females who once swore celibacy: “some were married to merchant families as parents arranged; some were married to military officers; some compromised to being married with someone introduced by friends; those who still held the slogan of celibacy, played intimately with their female friends, doing nothing but like newlyweds.”<sup>45</sup> Zhiqing’s comments, in

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<sup>44</sup> Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 100-1. According to Sang, in the formative discourse of homoeroticism in early twentieth century China, the neologism tongxing ai was defined as peripheral and abnormal to delineate the boundary of heterosexual love, so that heterosexual love was established as the center of human affection.

<sup>45</sup> Ling Ding, *Ding Ling QuANJI* 丁玲全集 (Shijiazhuang Shi: Hebei Renmin Chubanshe, 2001), 84. I am using my own translation here.

particular the analogy of newlyweds, in a sense, have elevated female-female relations onto the same level of heterosexual marriage with more emphasis on physical intimacy. That Chengshu suddenly felt Zhiqing was precisely talking about her seemed assuring her relation with Jiaying might be indeed homosexual.

As a subplot, the sentimental intimacy between Dezhen and Chunzhi paralleled Chengshu and Jiaying, intensifying the suspicion of homoeroticism in a female community. The same-sex relation between the two conforms to the typical characteristic of sisterly sentiment, in particular taking into the consideration that Dezhen is at the same time developing a heterosexual romantic relation with Ming, who made Chunzhi uneasy and even to interfere into the relation, that is, an incompatibility between same-sex sentiment and heterosexual romanticism, reminding of the relation between Peifang and Hunying in *Sui Mu*. A conventional mode, as a representation of the development of female emotion, would be the same-sex sisterly sentiment will very possibly end up with one's leaving for heterosexual romanticism, and the other young female will eventually move forward towards heterosexual marriage, either cheerfully or unwillingly. In other words, this same-sex relation, with a temporary intervention into heterosexual romanticism, will yet perform a transitional function of conveying a young female to the whole regime of heterosexuality, as an inevitable concomitant given the predominant discipline of heterosexuality in which young females tend to avoid heterosexual relations at certain stage for self-discipline and self-reputation, and on the other hand, also as a question of homoerotic inclination since it only lies in a negation of the normality of heterosexuality. While it seems that the text tends to

persistently deny a statement of homoeroticism in this female community, the relationship between Yuzei and Juanjuan finally strikes a heavy blow by questioning the ultimate weight of physical intimacy as the most problematic component in same-sex relations: “Yuzei touched Juanjuan’s wrist, warm and soft; she couldn’t help but held her. They started kissing.”<sup>46</sup> The narrative then states that by kissing they vented glory and happiness that didn’t want to tell others. The text doesn’t saunter along the border but makes the physical touch between the two young females extremely intimate, cumulatively intensifying the homoerotic inclination of same-sex relations in the female community. We’ve made it plain that given the longtime cultural suppression of overt physical expression for not only homosexual desire but also heterosexual love, no textual representation of physical intimacy doesn’t secure a non-erotic same-sex relation; in that way, does the presentation of physical intimacy assures an erotic same-sex relation? This text invokes further thoughts of the differences in physical intimacy between homosexual eroticism and sisterly same-sex sentiment. In other words, sisterly sentimental intimacy doesn’t exclude physical affection; on the contrary, body contacts, such as caress, cuddle and even kiss, are indispensable to naturally accompany the sentimental intimacy as an exterior form of psychological projection. The immediate association with homoeroticism is a product of the assumption that same-sex emotion, as a whole, must have something to do with sexuality, and this inevitability between the two has been further abnormalized with socialization of science. In the matter of fact, the form of same-sex emotion ought to be crystalized so that

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 94.

sisterly sentiment, as a modern female-female emotion neither assigned to domestic affection in the structure of kinship nor homosexual love, can be preliminarily defined as an independent power in feminine imaginary in terms of its constitution and exteriority. Body, therefore, as an important medium for emotional expression carrying out ideas and desires, is merely a materialization of interpersonal emotion.

Starting as early as the late imperial period, there have been plenty of discussions on the cult of *qing* in Chinese literature and society, yet we haven't taken a serious consideration of sisterly sentiment in terms of any quality and form of such *qing* in the context of Chinese society. It is not the only text in which Ding Ling mentions *Peony Pavilion* 牡丹亭, Tang Xianzu's well-known play in praise of emotion – *qing* – in the Ming Dynasty. In *Miss Sophie's Diary*, after getting the sad news of sister Yun's death, Sophie recalled the sweet times they spent together when sister Yun lay on the grass in a French park and sang *Peony Pavilion* for her. I believe that in Ding's texts, the intertextuality has been intentionally used as an allusion of woman's emotion that is not necessarily towards the opposite sex. According to Martin Huang's historical review of the philosophical and literary discourses of *qing* that have been closely associated with physical desire since the late Ming period, *Qing* was firstly authenticated ontologically by being philosophically associated with the renewal of life and consequently has the power to transcend the boundaries of life and death. As a result, *qing* has become something not only to celebrate, but something that is able to explain anything beyond the logic of reason, such as Liniang's resurrection for the sake of love in *Peony Pavilion*, or even homosexual love. Huang believed



that Feng Menglong's *Qingshi* transformed private feelings into public sentiments, so that *qing* became an essential factor for Confucian social order.<sup>47</sup> Huang's review of the cult of *qing* in Ming-Qing literature shows three features of the concept of *qing*. First of all, the literary discourse of *qing* is set up to revolve around romantic love, which defines the primary meaning of *qing* and begets another two features – its close association with physical desire and moral value. Consequently, *qing* once goes beyond the “normal” assumption – between the opposite sexes – it undergoes the censorship of morality. Haiyan Lee discussed *Peony Pavilion* as an example of a pre-modern play with Liniang's inwardness as an early form of women's subjectivity. In her discussion of the cult of *qing*, there was the convention of the scholar-beauty romance that could be traced back to the genre of *zhiguai* in Six Dynasties, while *Peony Pavilion* took a significant departure from the scholar-beauty convention by shifting the narrative focus from man to woman and to a massive description of a young woman's erotic emotion. Moreover, it is worthy of note that in *Peony Pavilion* there is a final reconciliation of personal emotion and worldly morality.<sup>48</sup> In the first half of the play, Liniang's traverse between life and death proclaimed that her “passionate love” – a combination of strong emotion and desire – had already blurred the border between sentiment and desire; in the second half, by finally bringing Liniang back to life, the play carried out a reconciliation of private sentiment and social order. As

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<sup>47</sup> Martin Huang, “Sentiments of Desire: Thoughts on the Cult of Qing in Ming-Qing Literature” in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol. 20 (Dec., 1998), 168-74.

<sup>48</sup> Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 43-45.

Lee pointed out, “the hierarchy of *xing*, *qing* and *yu* is already undermined.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, *qing* has become a complex of love, emotion, and desire that is tacitly accepted by moral orthodoxy. *Qing* has been given the elements of desire and morality as its own constitution. Therefore, the mythologization of *qing* by late Ming literati – granting it the legitimacy to transcend all social orders, including reason, morality, gender, and even life – is at the same time a process of its rationalization in the mundane world. The variation of the scholar-beauty romance constructed the full cult of *qing* in imperial China and played a central role in understanding late Qing sentimentalism and May Fourth romanticism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, *qing* was further publicized, parallel to the universalistic and scientific agendas of modernity. Romantic sentiment, being absolutely private in imperial China, had become the heart of public discourse as a representation of subjectivity by the 1930s when the urgency of saving the nation requested a more “masculine” rationalism. The element of the physical desire of *qing* was consolidated with the normalization of sexuality on the basis of the scientific discourse that stressed evolutionary theories, that is, the assumed emotional attachment between the opposite sexes, which had come into being in the long history of kinship-based society, was finally legitimated as the only natural form of romantic sentiment. Having been integrated into the public discourse and given a moral element, *qing* was always under social scrutiny. In her discussion of sentiment-based revenge, Eugenia Lean pointed out that such behaviors raised debates about the role of sentiment in the process of nation building, indicating

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 45.

that *qing*, though in different forms, was considered with political and moral issues of the day.<sup>50</sup>

The issue that sisterly sentiment causes suspicion of its homosexual tendency is its problematic position at the intersection of family affection and romantic sentiment, and thereby cannot be fully approved by the moral scrutiny of either one. As a relationship that is normally linked to kinship bonds, sisterly sentiment is likely to be questioned once physical desire gets involved, or the young female deeply indulges into the relationship and shows no interest in getting married; on the other hand, as heterosexuality has been scientifically secured as the only “normal” form of romantic relationship, it is very possible to associate sentiments between the same sex with homosexual desire. At issue here is the question: what is the real image of sisterly sentiment? There is in fact no particular space for female-female relationships in the side of reception. As a newly emerging modern form of same-sex relation distinguished from the imperial master-maid attachment that is strictly confined by the social hierarchy and economic dependence, sisterly sentiment, coming into being in a transitional period when the young female is detaching from the domestic structure to heterosexual marriage, enriches the pool of *qing* with its unique position of being a slippage between the spiritual dependence upon kin and the physical accompaniment with same-sex peers. Lifting the sisterly relation up to the same level as heterosexual romanticism by giving an insight into the sentimental as well as the physical intimacy between young females so that it can be divergent from domestic affection within the kinship structure, Ding Ling’s texts provide an imaginary space for an authentic representation of

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<sup>50</sup> Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 77-78.

such particular relationships between young females, which is at the same time a true space for “feminine details.” In this sense, the same-sex intimacy between young females turns out to be nothing but the most natural and normal interpersonal emotion.

Last but not least, the temporal dimension – summer break, as the title of the story shows – deserves further reflection. The story happened during summer break, a time when both students and instructors were normally off from school to relax. It was also a time that is temporarily detached from the normal control of the whole system of modern institutions. The young females had taken off from their responsibilities as teachers; some of them, like the students, returned home as daughters; discipline and supervision in modern institutions temporarily collapsed as the teacher-student relation disappeared. The heroines in this story therefore stayed together, not as school-teachers, but only as females, that is to say, there was a particular space for them to live together where they had no social identities and played no social roles for the time being. At the end of the story, there was a notion of returning to normalcy, in that everyone was getting busy in preparing for the beginning of a new semester. It seems that Ding Ling’s stories always have such circuitry, making the extremeness of same-sex intimacy extremely ambiguous. This results from a superposition of the deep-rooted recognition of interpersonal relations in the long history of the domination of heterosexual marriage, and a recent liberation of women and the thoughts of sexuality still under the control of the modern institution of heterosexuality. It is therefore also a real representation of the same-sex relation between young females under such dual influences.

**Ling Shuhua: The New and *Guixiu* (Boudoir)**

Sang Tze-lan explicitly affirmed that in Ling Shuhua's short story, "Shuo You Zheme Yihuishi" 说有这么一回事 (Once Upon a Time), the relationship between Yingman and Yunluo is homosexual eroticism. Sang compared Ling's version to the original story – "Ta Weishenme Turan Fafeng Le" 她为什么突然发疯了 (Why Did She Suddenly Go Crazy) written by a male writer, Yang Zhensheng, and found that the female-authored one was apparently a more vivid picture of the life of girl students in school and dorm, with detailed physical and psychological interactions. The big difference between the two stories, according to Sang, in fact lay in the explanations of the homosexual intimacy between the two female protagonists, Gu Yingman and Deng Yunluo. Giving shape to Gu Yingman, a mannish character, Yang attributed the same-sex love between her and Deng Yunluo to contrary gender role-playing in an improperly restrictive same-sex environment. Ling Shuhua, by contrast, created the same-sex love between the two in an environment that was fairly tolerant of homosexual eroticism – many other same-sex partners lived together without much censorship.<sup>51</sup> In other words, same-sex love has nothing to do with the inherent temperaments of either one in the pair, but it is more a form of same-sex relationship among a variety of possible female-female relationships. Through Sang's analysis, it's worth noting that Ling's portrayal of the relationship between Yingman and Yunluo indicates that young females do follow surrounding examples, giving an association with our discussion on the function of the sisterly figure who serves as a model for the developmental trajectory of the young female, in particular the transitional period from her adolescence to heterosexual

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<sup>51</sup> See Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 149-50.

marriage, and at the same time also reminds us that the images of women in the genre of romanticism in literature, film and television, will play a vital role in guiding female development in real life as a functional ideal.

The beginning of “Once Upon a Time” – an account of a romantic picture after school followed by the chatting of girl students – shared much in common with Lu Yin’s “Old Acquaintances at the Seashore.” The story, from the very beginning, in fact revealed the reproduction of heterosexual mechanics while an ideological hegemony organically got hold of people through state apparatuses. The gender-based classification of the school system at the onset of the modern era, at the same time ensured heterosexuality as an ideologically predominant notion so that girl students would avoid developing romantic relations with men at such an early age, before entering the stage of marriage as a sign of female maturity, and provided a same-sex space where they had practically very little chance to develop any relationship with the opposite sex, which yet induced the ambiguity of female same-sex friendship. The female protagonists in this story – Yingman and Yunluo – got to know each other and further developed a same-sex relationship when they played the leading roles in Shakespeare’s romantic drama, *Romeo and Juliet*. They are often teased for being lovers or a couple by other students after that, reinforcing the suspicion of homosexual proclivities. In their roles as lovers, Yingman and Yunluo experience physical intimacy like that which happens in a romantic relation between the opposite sexes, and which might arouse erotic desire at the age of puberty. It is consequently the heterosexual mechanics that produce such a form of same-sex

relation. On the other hand, the fact that, although the drama was performed by same-sex actors to avoid a violation of decorum, yet it caused suspicion of or even real homosexual eroticism is nothing new in Chinese culture. Numerous examples of homosexual tendency can be found in the relationship of male actors both in late imperial Chinese literature and in society while it comes to female this time. The experience of male homosexuality in Chinese cultural traditions led directly to the (mis)understanding of the female-female relationship that emerged in the modern era. Here are some descriptions of physical intimacy from *Once Upon a Time* that indeed incur a high suspicion of homosexual eroticism:

“Yingman said with a grin as she went over to Yunluo, gazing at the ivory skin of her exposed chest, then down past the large collar where she could make out the faint curve of her soft, slightly protruding breasts. ... Now and then an intoxicating aroma of Yunluo’s powder, hair, or flesh – it was hard to tell which – wafted up through the bed curtains.

Suddenly, Yingman flopped down on the bed too and cradled her arm around Yunluo’s neck, and said, ‘My entire body feels weak. What is that fragrance? Let me smell!’

...

As the others laughed, Yingman seized the moment to bury her face in Yunliuo’s breast and inhale deeply.”<sup>52</sup>

“Yingman wanted to lift Yunluo’s face to look at her, but she had nestled up to her shoulder laughing idiotically, which tickled her arm. Her lips touched Yunluo’s forehead, and before she knew it she had started kissing her, over and over again.

Yunluo whispered, ‘Did you sleep well?’

‘Splendidly!’ Yingman’s hand stroked Yunluo’s velvety cheeks as she said, ‘What if I weren’t a woman?...’

‘There you go again. Sleep! Yunluo pinched her gently, then put her cheek up against Yingman’s face. And so they slept, snuggled up closely together.’”<sup>53</sup>

“As she [Yingman] spoke, she smiled and kissed Yunluo’s cheeks repeatedly; then she

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<sup>52</sup> Shuhua Ling, “Once Upon a Time” in *Writing Women in Modern China: An Anthology of Women’s Literature from The Early Twentieth Century*, eds. Amy D. Dooling and Kristina M. Torgeson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 186-7.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 189.

smoothed down the strands of hair that the wind had blown astray. ...

‘What is it, my love?’ asked Yingman softly, as she embraced Yunluo tightly and nuzzled her face up close”<sup>54</sup>

Here again comes the issue of body that we have discussed above. We have made it plain that physical intimacy between young females, as the exteriority of emotional expression, is not necessarily associated with (homo)sexuality. In fact, its problematic position also lies in an absence of the female imaginary in language. How can we articulate the same-sex relationship, and how can we articulate the non-erotic female-female relationship within the reign of masculinity and heterosexuality, ultimately? Irigaray has pointed out that feminine imaginary should be neither a reduction to the masculine oneness, nor a simple substitution of masculine discourse. So long as the dominant logic presupposes a sexual indifference and makes the masculine logic the only one discourse, feminine pleasure will remain inarticulate in language; moreover, female sexuality has to be conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters. She further suggests the feminine discourse entails a copula other than the simple being.<sup>55</sup> How to interpret and carry out the copulative operation between the sexes in language that makes the feminine specificity come into being in its relation to language and then make the feminine discourse possible? The immediate association between the representation of same-sex physical intimacy and (homo)sexuality is precisely because we simply cannot create a true space for feminine imaginary in language within the sole logic of phallocentrism. Any description of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>55</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23-33.



female-female physical intimacy therefore renders an insinuation of homoerotic desire. A catachresis of the masculine syntax of discourse, logic, and politics is destined, since there's simply no language to articulate such a non-erotic same-sex relation, which still falls into the manipulation of discourse and leads to a suspicion of homosexuality.

Another embodiment of the mechanics of a predominate heterosexuality that works on the ambiguity of the female-female relationship is that there is constantly a wishful assumption or a self-delusion that one of the women in the relationship is a man. "What if I weren't a woman?"<sup>56</sup> "Why aren't you a man!"<sup>57</sup> Such thinking haunted Yingman and Yunluo. Moreover, both of them expressed eagerness to live together for life. Yingman suggested they followed the example of two female teachers who had been living together for years, and in this way, as Yingman said, "Can't you just consider this the same as being married to me!"<sup>58</sup> These ideas bring the same-sex relation between the two into the world of heterosexuality by making it counter to (heterosexual) marriage. So there is not only language, but also the thoughts of pairing up together as a couple. The two women are trying to find a form of pairing up to legitimate the relationship between them. There's ultimately no form other than marriage that they can think of, and thereby the element of sexuality has been embedded into their relationship. Different from the stories that center on the same-sex relationships in a female community, this text foregrounds

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<sup>56</sup> Shuhua Ling, "Once Upon a Time" in *Writing Women in Modern China: An Anthology of Women's Literature from The Early Twentieth Century*, eds. Amy D. Dooling and Kristina M. Torgeson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 189.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 191.

the relationship between Yingman and Yunluo as heroines, yet it seems that the writer consciously created a story with female romanticism as a backdrop against which the young females indulge in same-sex relationships without much notion of the abnormality of homosexuality. In other words, the writer seems to argue that, for the young females, the same-sex relationship doesn't exist as an opposition to heterosexuality, but is merely a form of their living status quo. Their anxiety over the same-sex relationships lies in the absence of a legitimate same-sex form, which again might not be necessarily homoerotic. The censorship of the abnormality of the female same-sex relationship is produced by and reproductive within discursive masculinity.

Romantic sentiment is by no means the only topic between Yingman and Yunluo. The absence of family affection, anxiety over the future and the like are always involved. Later we learn from the narrative that Yunluo lost her father and sister, and it seems that she did not get along with her mother and brother very well. She sadly poured out her worries to Yingman when they were taking a walk on campus one night. Her family chose a marriage prospect and wanted her to marry him quickly, yet she simply did not want to marry such a dull man who belonged to the old system of bureaucracy. In the study of literary representations of female sentimentality, the young females who get involved in intimate relations with the same sex always have a psychological insufficiency in their domestic life – an absence of a mother (Chengshu in *Shujia Zhong*), a dreary atmosphere (Peifang in *Sui Mu*), a family who is warm, yet doesn't quite understand her needs (Sophie in *Miss Sophie's Diary*) – that forces them to leave and seek a like-

minded partner as a parameter in institutional society, who is predetermined to be the same-sex, given the modern system of education and the culture regime of heterosexuality. The gap between the old family and the young female as a New Woman, as well as her uncertainty about the future, also inevitably lies in the enforced transition of the social structure. In other words, in addition to the main theme of romanticism in the narrative, these minor factors will disturb the intensity of homosexual eroticism anyway, withdrawing our attention from the direction of homoeroticism. It's worth noting that even a highly skeptical homosexual intimacy between young females, such as Yingman and Yunluo, in fact started from such non-erotic causations with certain occasional connections, rather than an intention to get close to another girl on account of her emotional drive, as happens in the fairly fixed form of heterosexual romanticism. This feature – a sense of alienation from family, society, and the future that distracts from homoerotic concentration – puts the equivocality of such female-female relationships into a constant myth.

In the Republican era, women writers, speaking firmly as New Women themselves, intended to produce stories that represented the discourse of sexuality based on imported western knowledge about sex, in which young females' understanding of the same-sex relationship was yet slipping between the non-eroticism of traditional kinship and the modern norm of sexuality. They seemed to be not quite innocent of the abnormality of same-sex intimacy, which was not solely based on the new introduction of sexuality as a category of medical science from the West, but more on the common sense that they got from the form of the family as a fundamental organ of human society; on the other hand, they were not consciously subject to strict boundaries of

sexuality as a scientific discourse either – many of them wanted to stay together for life, with the notion of entering into a heterosexual marriage. Ling Shuhua is categorized as a representative of the New Boudoir School, with which the epitome of sisterly sentimental intimacy resonates – a psychological projection that needs mutual interiority but in a quite new system of the modern institutional society.

### **The Turning to “Others”: *A Woman Soldier’s Own Story***

The outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War collapsed the school system – the instability of the transportation system hindered students and faculty from travelling from hometowns to cities, and many students and faculty took part in the war as soldiers, nurses and journalists. School administrations had to be shut down, and the space where young females developed same-sex relationships as docile bodies under the modern discipline of sexuality suddenly disappeared. As China was forced into the progress of modernity, likewise, Chinese New Women, as a newly emerging social population without a clear identity after merely thirty years or so, had to suspend their own footsteps of self-development to immediately undertake real social roles. They suddenly had no time to hesitate as “students without many social responsibilities” but needed to make decisions right away. The flames of war cleared the mist of the future, so some of them were determined to be on the spot of the fighting while others preferred to keep away from the battlefield by going back to the domestic sphere. Meanwhile, modern Chinese narratives were structured in a conflict between feminine details and nation building. Feminine details were deselected so that a consolidation of the discourses of

masculinity and nation salvation was created to constitute the problematic identity of subject-as-nation.<sup>59</sup> How was feminine imaginary represented through women's voices in such a historical moment of discursive masculinity? Was it the case that it was completely assimilated into the masculine discourse, as the school dress was replaced by military uniform? Why cannot such assimilation be considered a transformation?

*A Woman Soldier's Own Story* 一个女兵的自传 by Xie Bingying, a female soldier writer who participated in the North Expedition and anti-Japanese war, is an autobiographical work that, among a multitude of the author's military diaries, novels, short stories and travel essays, won her a great reputation for its authentic portrayal of a rebel girl who fought against feudal oppression and challenged the traditional institution of feminine identity. First published in 1936, on the eve of the full-scale Japanese invasion of China, the autobiography stamped the time when Rey Chow's "feminine details" had to give way to nation salvation through another representation of the romantic love of freedom. The literary image of feminine sentimentality dressed military uniforms became more straightforward, and women's narratives became consistent with the masculine voices of war and politics. The long autobiographical story of *A Woman Soldier's Own Story* starts from Xie's memory of childhood, if not as a swaddled baby girl, reminiscent again of Owen's argument of memory, in which a picture emerges from an authentic past, but has been embellished with subjective imaginings in the process of recalling it. In other words, an outline of the past – the memory – is not the past at all; the past can never be

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<sup>59</sup> See Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 86-96.

duplicated in any form of art, even in memoirs. The picture of “I” emerging from Xie’s childhood gave shape to a completely rebellious girl who fought for women’s equality from a very young age through her resistance against the traditional oppressions of women in the feudal patriarchy and her determined attempts to get educated. All the potentially romantic factors in Chinese tradition appeared negative – classic readings for women were dry and tasteless, spinning was boring, and there was no romantic attachment towards either men or women. In the story, we see a trace of sisterly sentiment among tea-picking girls, whose lives turned out to be full of desperation and tears. When they married, they were treated cruelly by their mothers-in-law and they even seldom ate a full meal. They felt their lives were not even as good as animals; they believed they had to accept such a miserable fate until they died. The girls were in fact quite eligible for a same-sex community in which there was a high potential for the development of sisterly sentiment; they were all the same age, worked together every day, and had the same life experiences. Yet it seems the narrative has no intention of indicating any sentimental intimacy in such repression of bitterness. “I” had no intimate communication with any of the young girls, but simply learned about life’s pains from their suffering. She used *they* rather than *we* to refer to the tea-picking girls, so she herself was excluded. The folk song followed therefore produced no romantic feeling, but only a taste of sadness. No sisterly sentimental intimacy developed among these tea-picking girls because they were simply subject to fate, which affirms the idea that only among educated women could such sentimental intimacy help to build up the self. “I,” holding firmly to the thought that women should have an equal right to get educated, was therefore

expected to find a sisterly figure later in such a Bildungsroman about a woman's life journey. The narrative yet doesn't directly go towards the theme of same-sex sentiment after the heroine entered school, but rather focuses on her feelings about school life and how she engaged in literature and writing, while the term "homosexual love" finally arrived during her middle school life anyway.

"At the time we did not really know the meaning of the term 'homosexual love.' Yet it was very strange how all our friends paired up in couples, inseparable whether in action or at rest. When two people met they fell in love. From love they moved to 'marriage' (when they slept together they were married)." <sup>60</sup>

Here we see a situation very similar to the environment that was fairly tolerant towards female same-sex relations in Ling Shuhua's *Shuo You Zheme Yihuishi*. From the first person's voice as a memoir, it becomes more plain that the young females in the story simply lived as same-sex couples, with or without much influence from the scientific conception of sexuality from the West. Given the long-time feudal constraints of the domestic confinement, and the improperness of any form of contact between the opposite sexes, they were "naturally" inclined to pick a same-sex partner to go through the transition from family to society when modern institutions provided such a space where young females lived and studied together everyday, away from home for long stretches of time. They had fled away from the birdcage, but had no given path to follow; they had each other, not for the sake of love, but for survival. In the

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<sup>60</sup> Bingying Xie, *A Woman Soldier's Own Story: The Autobiography of Xie Bingying*, trans. Lily Chia Brissman and Barry Brissman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 40.

meanwhile, terms such as “love” and “marriage” that we have to borrow from the cultural monopoly of masculinity and heterosexual power apparently also impact the understanding of the same-sex relationship by embedding an implication of romantic eroticism. Following the narrative, we see another example of female psychology that is different from that of those who follow the majority to pair up in couples with the same-sex or indulge in a heterosexual romantic relationship. In fact, the author in fact once again alienated herself from other young females by using *they* rather than *we*, indicating that she might not take up the same life pattern as the other girls in school. Minggang, the name of “I” in the story, was selected as a sisterly figure by two classmates but she simply felt uncomfortable living with a same-sex friend. The admiration and love from other young females left her with a feeling of trouble and misfortune. When other classmates wanted to pair her up with Miss Chen by forcibly dragging her into Chen’s bed, she was truly scared and felt terrible for the whole night. An expected same-sex relation that started with a night full of intimate talking finally ended up with her silence and slipping away. The following section of the memoir continued its focus on the heroine’s studies of literature and creative writing, indicating that her same-sex relation had led nowhere. A short description of heterosexual romance came up in the form of her diary fragments that created a sense of feminine sentiment, but that was quickly disrupted by a reversal of gender convention in that she was a woman who had already registered in the military and she encouraged a man to join the army and go to the war front. Still, such a romantic emotion for a man, short enough though it was, came up after the stage of same-sex sentiment delineated the female developmental



trajectory. The Northern Expedition in 1926, the alarm clock of that era, as the author depicted it, freed Minggang from a swamp of love and at the same time relegated any personal emotion into private realm in opposition to revolution as the only public discourse. To be a soldier had not only become one of women's voices, the heroine was so determined that she finally became a female soldier after setbacks and effort. Even though the idea of being a soldier was greatly affected by her second brother, and her primary purpose to joining the army was to escape from an arranged marriage, she was indeed more interested in reading books on social science and revolutionary theory, and was very passionate about taking part in political movements. She was very willing to sacrifice herself to the country, and finally, from body to spirit, very ready to fight a victorious war. Given all these personal experiences of a woman who attempted to join the military, rather than saying that women were integrated into the voices of the era as the gender boundary was temporarily blurred for the sake of nation building, I would argue that feminine imaginary should have been enriched as the new identities which had been solely proper to men, and created for women, and eventually fulfilled and developed by women themselves. The narrative reveals Minggang not an individual case:

“I believe that what motivated nine out of ten of my female schoolmates to become soldiers, in those days, was their wish to escape the pressure of their feudal families and to search for their own futures. Yet as soon as we had put on our uniforms and were holding guns and clubs, our motives changed. For who would not wish, in such a moment, to shoulder the burden of the people's revolution, to build a rich and strong Republic of China?”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

Along the way of searching for their own futures, there were some women chose to fight feudal repression on the spot. They could not stand off-site as witness, but decided to devote themselves to the power of the mass on the battlefield. They believed, as women, they were also responsible for the country, the people, and the society. “What a wonderful world! I would not have believed that we Chinese women, repressed by ancient custom for thousands of years, would see the day when we would become soldiers. Now we must work hard to carry out our responsibility, to change society, to destroy the powers of feudalism.”<sup>62</sup> Such mighty thoughts in fact are no different from those voices of male revolutionaries who represent the discourse of revolution as the main force. Chinese women are not simply assimilated into the grand narrative of nation building; but rather, they have created new feminine voices in their own right.

What does sisterly sentiment mean for such a female soldier? How is the representation of same-sex sentimental intimacy in such a biographical narrative of a woman soldier’s trek different from those female Bildungsroman stories that embrace the aura of romanticism? Did she even have sisterly relationships? Certainly yes. Like other heroines, she encountered different sisterly figures on her way to becoming a soldier. Shurong, a fellow student whom she met on her way to join the army, was a same-sex friend that she wanted to share everything with. “I” and Shurong’s friendship developed when they were on a train, on their way to join the Central Military and Political School. They jumped off the train at a nameless station to look for

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 64.

a toilet in the nearby village, but they didn't come back in time before the train left. They therefore had to find a place to spend the night in an unknown village until the next train came. Later we find out from the narrative that they became good friends, telling each other everything, and "I" even let Shurong read her love letter. Another sisterly figure was Xiang, the only person, as she believed, who understood her in the village. Their friendship started as early as elementary school. Xiang was in a very similar situation when Minggang refused to marry into the Xiao Family, as her family had arranged, and she was imprisoned by her mother. Minggang and Xiang made a plan to escape together. Different from the sisterly sentiment that centers on the young females' psychological intimacy that developed in their talks about family, love, and life in the stories such as *Old Acquaintances at Seashore*, the narrative of *A Women Soldier's Own Story* focuses on the pragmatic composition of Minggang's same-sex relations so that it serves as an integration of her life ideal of being a soldier. For the first relationship with Shurong, the narrative unfolds in detail about how the two young females tried to find a safe place to lodge for the night and how the strangers treated them; when Minggang let Shurong read her love letter, their conversation quickly ended with Shurong's very brief conclusion, "unfortunately, he's not a comrade..."<sup>63</sup> Xiang seemed to have a deeper sisterly friendship with Minggang from childhood. She appeared in the narrative at the moment when both of them were grounded by their parents because they refused to obey the family arranged marriages. They simply couldn't have any intimate conversations. Their conversations were all about how to make a successful escape, how

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 67.

to move fast, and how about their families came after them when they escaped. After their escape failed, Xiang was forced into the arranged marriage and finally became the mother of three children. In this sense, Minggang's relationship with Xiang functions as an episode – one of her four escapes from the feudal repression of her traditional family – of her determined will to fight for women's freedom. The theme of sisterly relationships represented as an integral part in the heroine's practice of fighting feudal repression and becoming a female soldier rather than a catalyst in the progress of psychological maturation, to a large extent, alienated her from the whole framework of women's subjectivity in terms of romanticism and sexuality. In a word, the same-sex relationship still played a role in female development but in a more practical way.

In addition, the narrative of *A Women Soldier's Own Story* is also quite different from, if not opposite to, the texts that center on sisterly sentimental intimacy in terms of the weight of political matters. In stories such as Lu Yin's *Old Acquaintances at Seashore* and Ding Ling's *Shujia Zhong*, the heroines did not seem to be very interested in political movements. They even felt disappointed that their studies were constantly disrupted by strikes, demonstrations, student protests, and such; whereas in *A Woman Soldier's Own Story*, the heroine, Minggang, was very passionate about taking part in various social movements which she believed were real battlefields to fight for women's equality and freedom; she herself was a political activist. In the section regarding the June First incident, the author recalled how she joined the parade in support of the May Thirtieth Martyrs with slogans such as "Pay back life!" "Down with imperialism!" and how she, together with other students, crowded into the government building to demand the

release of the student representatives who had been put in jail by the provincial government. They refused to return to school until some of the arrested students were released by nine o'clock in the evening. From early the next morning she joined the propaganda groups to go out and give speeches to the public all day long and felt no fatigue. She had no nostalgia for her school days. She believed, as soon as the alarm bell for the era was rung by some social event like the June First incident, that politics had become the only site where she could fight for women, freedom, and her own future: "The tragedy of June First was like a bomb. It awoke countless hot-blooded young men and women. What is more, it awoke muddle-headed me, who until then had only known how to hide in the library every day to read *The Sorrows of Young Werther*."<sup>64</sup> This is a big contrast to the other texts we have discussed, in which the heroines indulged in same-sex sentimentality at school and alienated themselves from social and political events, and the narrative features an intensive romanticism and de-politicization.

In stark contrast, in Xie's autobiography, there is a de-emphasis of romanticism as the narrative is weighted with politics. What's more, romanticism, which is considered merely selfish and should be replaced with love of country and love of the people, has been eventually put in opposition to revolution. For those who did fall in love, sharing the same revolutionary ideal was a precondition. "To those who believed strongly in offering their lives to their country and its people," as "I" recalled, "romance seemed merely a toy for young ladies and young men

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 47.

of the idle class. Such, in those revolutionary days, was our view of romance.”<sup>65</sup> The concept of class is intervened here not only to grant a privilege to revolution, but also to indicate that romance has become something that should be discarded and repressed.

The birth of such a new type of Chinese woman – a latter-day Mulan who joins the army for the sake of nation and women’s liberation<sup>66</sup> – together with such literary works penned by women writers as self-empowerment, designated the end of Republican romanticism and the coming of a revolutionary era, with a shift of focus from personal anxiety over sentimentality to the revolutionary ideal of fighting for the country and the people. Personal emotion, either between the same sex or the opposite sexes, was greatly reduced to mere interludes in life. As women became willing to sacrifice all for the revolution as a subject of historical agency, feminine imaginary as such ought to be enriched as a force to represent Chinese modernity in a position equal to men, that is to say, woman should be considered neither as merely a gendered subjective of the anxiety of modernity nor as a passive subject standing on the border to be taken to suture the historical discontinuity. The discourse of modernity is not solely represented and dominated by masculinity. When Hu Ying discussed the emerging figure of the New Woman, who was composed in the transitional period of late Qing and early Republic, she suggested that the Chinese New Woman, rather than being a completely original or even coherent singularity, was in fact born to a hybridity in the fusion of talented women in the Chinese tradition and the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>66</sup> Weili Ye, “Review of *A Woman Soldier’s Own Story: The Autobiography of Xie Bingying*” in *The China Journal*, No. 49 (January, 2003), 229.

transcendent image of Western women, with the constitutive intervention of translation; the myriad figures of Chinese New Women that developed from such a contradictory rudiment and moved towards a full-scale war of nation salvation, too, by no means designated a plurality of woman fixed on the conventional femininity. They were crystalized into different appearances with individual subjectivity through women's own voices. Texts such as *A Woman Soldier's Own Story* constitute the turning point of feminine imaginary in the Republican era. As feminine romanticism that centers on same-sex sisterly sentiment has faded out to a marginal position in feminine discourse as Otherness, the image of the Republican period in our minds finally ends with the gunfire of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937. The obsession with romanticism has been replaced by the grand narrative of nation building that features monolithic realism, while the era of revolution was opened by the most talented woman writer in the history of modern Chinese literature – Zhang Ailing – not as a pioneer but as an absolute other.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Chinese Revolution and Post-Revolutionary Political Propaganda

The year 1937 is of historical significance in the quest and the formation of a new unified subjectivity of modern Chinese literature. Beginning with the Battle of Marco Polo Bridge in July 1937, when Japanese imperial policy aimed to expand Japanese military forces into interior Chinese territories, and when China began full-scale resistance to the expansion of the Japanese invasion, the year 1937 became a watershed for both the nation and the national discourse of modern Chinese literature. The Chinese government and many historians considered that the war began even earlier, in September 1931, when Chinese troops were defeated in fighting against the Japanese invasion in northeast China, and Japan created the puppet state of Manchukuo. Therefore, many Chinese cultural productions that were set in the Second Sino-Japanese War often started their narratives with the national crisis in the year 1931 as a social context foreshadowing the outbreak of full-scale war in 1937, when the main storyline unfolded. Some examples of this are *Nanjing 1937: A Love Story* 一九三七年的爱情 by Ye Zhaoyan, and Yang Mo's *The Song of Youth* 青春之歌, the novel discussed in this chapter. Starting from 1937, the urgency of national salvation went in quest of a thorough uniformity of the national discourse, in which the weak, the poor, and women were integrated into a uniformity of revolutionary discourse dominated and represented by masculine politics. As a result, the literary representations became correspondingly political in nature. This revolutionary discourse



centering on the War of Resistance to Japan was in fact created in an intensive combination with the patriotic narrations to celebrate the birth of an independent new country after 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party finally defeated the Kuomintang and unified China. It was further reconstructed in a transformation into a highly consistent eulogistic discourse on the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, and more specifically, on Chairman Mao, with the peak occurring in the period of the Cultural Revolution.

At the beginning of the twentieth-century, women's liberation produced a gendered modernity as China was forced into a universal track of western modernization. The heroines of women's liberation became central figures in fiction to celebrate free love as a symbol of freedom, autonomy, and equality – which three elements build up the self of a social individual. It was also in this period that the theme of sisterly sentimentality, as a reflection of a female interpersonal relationship brought about by the modern education system, as well as an element involved in free love and denoting the disposition of romance, emerged and developed into an inherent literary practice in the narrations on female development. With the urgency of national salvation that demanded a total mobilization to fight against the Japanese invasion in 1937, women, whose identity had shifted from that of heroines of free love to a population of revolutionaries in the discursive manipulation of gender strategy, were liberated again as an integration of the weak and the poor, and remained subordinated into the discourse of nation-building, which was represented by masculine politics. Female sentimentality, which disseminated a strong air of romance, was now de-selected in the marriage of literature and

politics and further replaced by images of how women had been saved, helped, and awakened by the Communist ideas of revolution, and how they finally stepped onto the revolutionary road of nation-building.

It is worth noting that most of these literary images of revolutionary women were created in complicity with a de-selection of the notion of romance<sup>67</sup> in the 1950s, as a result of the political propaganda that celebrated and consolidated the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, rather than in the 1940s, when many young females indeed committed themselves to the Chinese revolution. Meanwhile, the manipulation of gender strategy once again effectively operated in the 1950s as well as in the Cultural Revolution, according to which the theme of women's liberation was infused with another emphasis of identity – an integration into the vast population of peasants in the rural areas – in the nationwide land reform movements to overthrow the landlord class and abolish landownership. In the early stage of socialism, from the 1950s, nationwide movements of land reform, marriage reform, and collectivization in the rural areas sought women's active participation. As a part of her research on the early socialism of 1950s China, Gail Hershatler interviewed a number of rural women in Shaanxi province to examine, through their memories, how gender figured into the creation of socialism.<sup>68</sup> One of the

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<sup>67</sup> Here the notion of romance refers to an atmosphere of interpersonal sentimental ideal featuring a detachment from political and social stress, as I discussed in the chapter of the Republican era.

<sup>68</sup> Given the limited source of cultural and social history in 1950s China caused by the overwhelming predominance of Party/state voices centered on state-initiated campaigns, Hershatler investigated local narratives of early socialism in the 1950s by interviewing 67 older women in the rural villages in Shaanxi province. As a doubly marginalized group who remembered those years, their voices and memories not only provided a vivid picture of how these women's lives were, indeed, greatly changed and improved in their participation in construction of early socialism, but also helped to answer the questions of how gender figured in the discursive construction of the early socialism, and how socialism created gendered selves locally. See Gail Hershatler, "The Gender of Memory: Rural Chinese

interlocutors, Cao Zhuxiang, who was a prominent regional labor model in central Shaanxi, referred to the 1950s, as many older people remembered, as “a golden age.” Like many Chinese rural women who suffered from the feudal system of marriage, Cao ate all the bitterness through her marriage. At the age of sixteen, she married a man three years younger than she, in a household with no adult males, and became a widow when she was twenty-four years old. From then on, she had to farm on her own – plowing, hoeing, raking, and leveling the land – and raise two young children at the same time. Cao was not a rare example of women’s suffering in rural China. According to Hershatler’s research, in the spring of 1950, Cao organized seven women who had similar life experiences into a spinning and weaving co-op with a loan from the Party secretary, an activity supported and advocated by the Party in the movements of land reform and collectivization. The seven women purchased some yarn in the south of the village, set up three looms in Cao’s house, and set to work. The group of seven grew to twenty-one and transformed into an agricultural mutual aid team by the summer.<sup>69</sup> As the head of this women’s group, Cao was recognized as a local labor model by the Party.

It is reasonable to imagine that these women, having the same sufferings and life experiences, were well acquainted with one another and developed good friendships in their everyday work. It is also worth noting that, although she was a twenty-four-year-old widow and still young after the Liberation, Cao didn’t remarry. When she was asked in the interview why

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Women and the 1950s” in *Signs*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Gender and Cultural Memory Special Issue, eds. Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (Autumn 2002): pp. 43-70.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 47.

she hadn't remarried, she answered that she simply had had no intention of doing that. She had children to care for, she had work to do, and she still considered remarriage to be shameful.<sup>70</sup> In other words, it was the state, as an external entity, that brought women into the outside world and the traditional oppression of women by patriarchal marriage that created Cao's new life as a virtuous labor model. Cao Zhuxiang was selected as a Northwest Region labor model in 1951, and as the chair of the collectivization of lower producers' cooperatives in 1954, and later she became known as one of the "Five Silver Flowers," or provincial heroines of cotton production.<sup>71</sup> Cao's life had been filled with socialist activities of production, and all the titles she won suggested a gendered socialist self that was generated through the state politics as an external entity capable of creating a consistent inner world. The fact that local women's groups developed on the basis of socialist labor, although we didn't see many psychological details in their friendship, suggested that the representations of women had been greatly intervened into, if not controlled, by the state discourse of political propaganda, so that the feminine details centering on psychological descriptions of the inner world were completely replaced by women's outside activities that created their new lives under the guidance of the Party's leadership. In addition, Cao's choice of not remarrying and her selection as a model, for not only women in the rural areas but also for all Chinese women, illustrated that women's lives were indeed largely changed into a more outward-bound mode by all of the socialist labor work that advocated women's participation. Women had become a gendered site in which the state discourse of political

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 48.

propaganda – the big life difference before and after the Liberation – was demonstrated, operated, produced, and reproduced uniformity.

In the 1950s, the image of rural women was greatly enlarged into the center of women's liberation as a demonstration of the big improvement of people's lives after the Liberation. In such a political and social context, there was no space at all to develop a narration on female sentimentality through the paradigm of the portrayal of sisterly sentiment as an urban homosocial relationship that constructs women's awakening in sexuality and social agency, a psychologically transitional stage in female maturation, as well as a same-sex intervention of heterosexual love. Women's subjectivity had been assimilated into the discourse of revolution, in which the interior normality of a built-in literary subject was de-selected, if not completely removed, and replaced by a politically gendered self that was constituted by and was committed to the exterior uniformity with the approval of political censorship. It is in this sense that the years from 1937 to the end of the 1970s became an entire period in which the narratives of modern Chinese literature were dominated by political discourse of nation building, and those detached from politics were therefore condemned as marginal others at the time. The political intervention, as a top-down power with full capability of infiltration through absolute executive force is also why some prominent writers, for example, Eileen Chang, were de-selected, criticized, and banned, while they were re-considered to be distinguished and highly praised when literary aesthetics returned to narrations centered on love as an enduring theme in literature at the time that China relocated its position in the community of global capital.

### **Eileen Chang: A Continuity of the Republican Legend in the Era of the Chinese Revolution**

The best and the most important writer in modern Chinese literature, Eileen Chang, together with her writings, which center on love in mundane life, was a legend of the continued romanticism of the Republican era in the 1940s. Born in 1920, Eileen Chang made her literary debut in 1943, when the Second Sino-Japanese War was already in full swing and many territories of China, for example, the northeast, Shanghai, Nanjing, and most of the eastern coastal areas, were under the occupation of the Japanese Imperialists. Although, she was renowned for her stories of romance in Shanghai and Hong Kong, which were both occupied by Japan at the time, her writings were not invested much with warfare and political movements, but rather, featured an urban atmosphere of bourgeois life, as a continuity of the romanticism in the Republican era.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, unlike May Fourth literature, which aimed to represent self-liberation and self-autonomy through the theme of free love, Chang's stories didn't have a strong ambition to show either the process of self-identification or the construction of individual subjectivity. The value of her writing lies precisely in a pure portrayal of love, as the most significant and the sincerest emotion of human beings, in the setting of a timeless mundaneness, with her distinguished style of telling stories that developed from her massive reading of classical Chinese literature as well as her outstanding literary talent. A strong notion of timelessness often starts from the very beginning of her stories. For example, one of her signature works *Love in a Fallen City* 倾城之恋 begins with a description of the heroine's family

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<sup>72</sup> Except for her 1955 novel *The Rice Sprout Song* 秧歌.

in terms of time: “Shanghai’s clocks were set an hour ahead so the city could ‘save daylight,’ but the Bai family said: ‘We go by the old clock.’ Ten o’clock to them was eleven to everyone else. Their singing was behind the beat; they couldn’t keep up with the huqin of life.”<sup>73</sup> There is a very similar beginning in another of her well-known novellas, *The Golden Cangue* 金锁记, “Shanghai thirty years ago on a moonlight night... maybe we did not get to see the moon of thirty years ago. To young people the moon of thirty years ago should be a reddish-yellow wet stain the size of a copper coin, like a teardrop on letter paper by To-yun Hsuan, worn and blurred. In old people’s memory the moon of thirty years ago was gay, larger, rounder, and whiter than the moon now. But looked back on after thirty years on a rough road, the best of moons is apt to be tinged with sadness.”<sup>74</sup> While most of the literary works in 1940s China aimed at constructing the grand narrative of nation-building in settings of the political movements at the time and women’s liberation centered on women’s participation in politics, Chang worked on the de-selection of romantic love, though not intentionally. Resonating with the Republican era in her writing style of de-politicization, Eileen Chang opened the era of the Chinese revolution as an absolute Other. As a result, her writings were de-selected for a long time as bourgeois culture that went against the Chinese Communist propaganda.

In the timeless space that Eileen Chang created to develop a thoroughly heterosexual story of romance, the theme of sisterly sentiment between girl students, as a homosocial relationship

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<sup>73</sup> Eileen Chang, “Love in a Fallen City” in *Love in a Fallen City*, trans. Karen S. Kingsbury and Eileen Chang (New York Review Books, 2006), 111.

<sup>74</sup> Eileen Chang, “The Golden Cangue” in *Love in a Fallen City*, trans. Karen S. Kingsbury and Eileen Chang (New York Review Books, 2006), 171.

emerged, together with the establishment of the modern institution of education, and quickly became a common social phenomenon at the time of Chang's writing. This sisterly relationship was naturalized as a social backdrop that facilitated the production of an intensive atmosphere of romance, urban life, and the bourgeoisie, and as a female developmental stage that does not need much particular description. The sisterly relationship – an indispensable attachment slipping between the young female's interiority and exteriority – goes naturally alongside the narrative as the plots unfold. Her unfinished autobiographical novel, *Xiao Tuanyuan* 小团圆 (*Little Reunion*, 2009), starts with the everyday life of a group of female students at a church school. Their casual chatting, doing school work, having dinner, commuting between home and school, all these trivial matters in their school days creates the context in which the main storyline, centering on the romantic love between Jiuli and a married man, unfolds and develops. The narrative indicates an intimate sisterly relationship between Jiuli and her roommate, Bibi, through Jiuli's mother's saying that, "Bibi is capable, but don't go under her control."<sup>75</sup> Jiuli understood that her mother is referring to same-sex love. Living together as roommates in school, Jiuli and Bibi often use subtle gestures as their affectionate flirting. Sleeping in the same bed, Jiuli sometimes touches Bibi's naked legs. She also likes touching the tip of Bibi's nose. But after her mother warns her not to develop a same-sex love relation with Bibi, Jiuli feels that a dislike of Bibi's short legs secures their relationship as non-erotic sisterly friends. This illustrates that at the time, the awareness of homosexuality as an abnormal same-sex relationship, now endorsed by modern

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<sup>75</sup> Eileen Chang, *Xiao Tuanyuan* (Beijing Shiyue Wenyi Chubanshe, 2009), 29. I am using my own translation here.



medical science, closed the possibility of any sexual form that went beyond the heterosexual normality. More specifically, the female same-sex relationship, featuring a psychological intimacy as well as possible non-erotic physical closeness, has been largely contravened by the modern clarification of homosexuality based on the masculine discourse, and thereby, its real form has remained undefined.

Eileen Chang's *Xin Jing* 心经 (*Heart Sutra*, 1943), first published in the magazine *Wanxiang* 万象 (*Phenomena*), with the same title as a popular Buddhist Sutra, is a short story that centers on the parent-child relationship, specifically, the Oedipus complex, in the father-daughter relationship. The heroine, Xu Xiaohan, a twenty-year-old female coming from a well-to-do family, had a constant romantic love for her father, Xu Fengyi, a man of nearly forty, while she demeaned her mother as being a weak and incompetent old woman, in her eyes. Unlike most stories involving Freud's Oedipus complex, which are usually set in an atmosphere of tension, anxiety, and, sometimes, even violence, *Xin Jing* starts its storyline with an extremely leisurely chat among several girl students at Xiaohan's birthday party. They are apparently her good friends at school, and the main topic of their chat is romantic affairs, which once again demonstrates that heterosexual romance has constituted the main body of non-erotic sisterly sentiment and functioned to convey the young female into the whole mechanics of the heterosexual regime. For example, through a conversation between Xiaohan and Lingqing, we get to know that a male student, Gong Haili, who was mentioned earlier by the girls at the birthday party, actually loves Xiaohan secretly. While keeping her secret about being in love with

her father, Xiaohan suggests that Lingqing might develop a romantic relationship with Gong Haili. This conversation illustrates that the sisterly intimacy lies in a mutual psychological confession of heterosexual love as women's innermost secrets. Derived from the dominant discourse of heterosexuality as a same-sex friendship to avoid going against the patriarchal censorship of women's virtue, the sisterly relationship is a psychological intimacy, to a large extent, consisting of the content of heterosexual love in that, again, due to the moral oppression of women under the patriarchal censorship, women were not allowed to speak of love in public. But ultimately, they had to have someone to confide in. In other words, the normalization of heterosexuality as not only the dominant discourse of human society, but also as the only legitimate form of familial structure that constitutes human society, in complicity with the modern institution strictly established on the basis of sex segregation, and the endorsement of modern medical science based on the theory of evolution, create a space for young females to develop a same-sex relationship, upon which the young female finds a sisterly figure to confide her heterosexual love as a psychologically intimate topic that is not allowed to be spoken of in public caused by the oppression of patriarchal censorship. In this way, the young female will enter the next stage, that of heterosexual marriage, as a normal routine in the developmental trajectory of her maturation, so that the conventional womanhood is maintained, and the patriarchal values are strengthened; in the meanwhile, this same-sex relationship will remain non-erotic and the possibility of any transition that would break the binary of heterosexuality is closed. The intact operation of the mechanics of heterosexuality is therefore impenetrable.

Coming from a poor family and living a boring life with her mother and sister-in-law, Xiaohan's sisterly friend, Lingqing, is eager for love and marriage. In fact, she considers marriage – being married to a promising man – a way out of her stagnant life. Lingqing's father died early. The absence of Lingqing's father and her final choice to become a concubine of Xiaohan's father serves as a minor storyline to the father-daughter love between Xiaohan and Xu Fengyi to strengthen the notion of Freud's Oedipus complex as the central theme of the story. It seemed that Lingqing indeed takes Xiaohan's suggestion of developing a romantic relationship with Gong Haili, though she finally breaks up with him and falls in love with Xiaohan's father. It's worth noting that the narrative reveals a similarity between Xiaohan and Lingqing in Xu Fengyi's eyes, which might be a hint of the final romantic union between Lingqing and Xu Fengyi. This similarity is in fact by no means a coincidence, but a common phenomenon between sisterly friends. Having internalized the principles of conventional womanhood, the young female selects a sisterly friend most like her from among the girl students in school, according to the criteria approved by the patriarchal censorship as the dominant discourse. This sisterly figure further functions as a model who mirrors a panoramic picture of becoming a woman for the young female to recast herself, through imitation. Therefore, sisterly friends usually share similarities from exteriority consisting of ideological elements in accordance with the dominant social discourse, such as family origin, outward appearance, dress, interest, and such, to character formation constructed and approved by the constant domination of patriarchal values. Being Xiaohan's best friend and very similar in appearance to Xiaohan, Lingqing finally

replaces Xiaohan as Xu Fengyi's lover. In fact, she became the final solution to the Oedipus complex in the Xu family. In this story, sisterly sentiment, a same-sex relationship between girl students that was common enough at the time to be set as a backdrop, works as a connection between a psychoanalytical dilemma within the familial structure and a heterosexual romance as a social relationship. Although Lingqing didn't intend to help Xiaohan move out of her Oedipal dilemma, she indeed functions as a solution to convey Xiaohan to a "normal" developmental trajectory that complies with social rules. For Lingqing, on the other hand, her sisterly friend Xiaohan introduces her to Xu Fengyi, a man who helps her achieve her dream of stepping out of her own family through heterosexual marriage.

With the minor storyline of the absence of the father to create an intense notion of the father-daughter relationship, the story *Xin Jing* centered on the theme of Freud's Oedipus complex, with the setting of the sisterly relationship between girl students as a background and as a final solution. A very common phenomenon at the time, the sisterly relationship has been naturalized as a female self-developmental stage when the young female is about to enter heterosexual marriage. It is at the same time her first step of coming out of her kin-related role of being a daughter, and it is her final alliance with same-sex friends through a psychologically intimate imitation before entering heterosexual marriage as a mark of a woman's maturation. Setting the sisterly relationship as a solution to the Oedipus complex in order to re-direct the heroine into the developmental routine of a woman's maturation, this story illustrated that non-erotic sisterly friendship embodies the gender strategy of heterosexual normality rather than

providing a possibility towards a homosexual transition.

### ***The Song of Youth: Romanticizing Revolutionary Literature through A De-romanticization of Women***

The birth of the People's Republic of China was followed by an immediate flourishing of political-oriented literature in the 1950s that mainly consisted of eulogies of the Chinese Communist leadership as a celebration of the success of Chinese revolution and a numerous narrations about youth as a symbol representing the vigorous growth of the new nation. According to Taciana Fisac's research on the modification of modern classics in 1950s China, asking for absolute loyalty to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the totalitarian state organically operated an extremely strict literary censorship through a network of state-owned publishing houses that were in charge of performing ideological examinations of literary texts. The chief editors were selected more for their political qualifications than for their editorial professionalism. Many books were banned due to their "political mistakes"; writers were subjected to the psychological pressure of self-censorship to avoid being labeled as "rightists" and "capitalist roaders"; some of the literary canon written before the establishment of the People's Republic of China was revised and modified to go through the literary censorship.<sup>76</sup> For example, Fisac analyzed in detail how Ba Jin's *Family*, a wide-read semi-biographical novel first published in the 1930s that reflected how the young generation fought against feudalism in their quest for Chinese modernity, was issued in new editions by the People's Literature Publishing

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<sup>76</sup> Taciana Fisac, "Anything at Variance with It Must Be Revised Accordingly: Rewriting Modern Chinese Literature During the 1950s" in *The China Journal*, 67 (Jan. 2012), 131-4.

House from the 1950s, in which significant changes, alterations and modifications were made to highlight the historical importance of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and to increase political correctness.<sup>77</sup>

It was in this social context of political propaganda in complicity with strict censorship that the discourse of youth was produced to create a metaphorical consistency between the new nation-state and the young people as a symbol representing beauty, health and energetic growth; moreover, it was in the creation of the discourse of youth that a new image of women's self-developmental trajectory emerged. Zhong Xueping suggested that, there was a quiet linguistic shift of the term "youth" in Chinese, literally from *qingnian* in the 1920s to *qingchun* in the 1950s.<sup>78</sup> Given the linguistic difference of these two words in sentence construction, I understand this "shift" as not a replacement, but an emphasis of *qingchun* in the public discourse, which might indicate a discursive shifting from the subject to the process of subjectivation. Referring to the historically significant force rebelling against the traditional conceptions in the quest for modernity in the May Fourth movement at the beginning of twentieth-century China, *qingnian* focused on the inner turmoil of the emerging individual – the building up of the self; *qingchun*, having another sense, denoted a time duration of an energetic young adult that could be constructed through celebration, dedication, and even sacrifice. At the same time, the discourse of youth was created as a nostalgia and as a new vision for the future, with the transitions marked

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 137-42.

<sup>78</sup> Xueping Zhong, "'Long Live Youth' and the Ironies of Youth and Gender in Chinese Films of the 1950s and 1960s" in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall, 1999), 155-6.

by the use of representative works as slogans of the era throughout Chinese modernization – from *Song of Youth* (*Qingchun Zhi Ge* 青春之歌) in the 1950s, to *Long Live Youth* (*Qingchun Wansui* 青春万岁) in the 1980s, and to *Youth Without Regrets* (*Qingchun Wuhui* 青春无悔) in the 1990s.<sup>79</sup> It is worth noting that many youth-oriented productions centered on the story of a young woman's self-development; in stark contrast to the portrayal of female self-development at the beginning of the twentieth-century that shed light on how a young female built up the self through psychological struggles and inner confessions, the images of women in the 1950s drew a new configuration of how the heroine suffered, fought against, and survived through the darkness in the “old” society, and finally became a committed revolutionary or a young adult with a revolutionary will, who enjoyed her new life in the construction of Chinese socialism. In a sense, as the aesthetics of Chinese literature changed into a eulogy of the Chinese revolution and socialism led by the Chinese Communist Party, the literary images of women romanticized didactic revolutionary literature through a de-romanticization of women's self-developmental trajectory.

First published in 1958, *The Song of Youth* 青春之歌, by Yang Mo, is a socialist literary canon that exemplified youth-oriented literature centering on the image of a young woman. It depicts the *bildung* journey of the heroine, Lin Daojing, an eighteen-year-old female who bravely resisted and escaped the marriage arranged by her adoptive mother. She became enlightened by the Communist ideas and eventually grew into a firm proletarian revolutionary. A

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 157.

female bildungsroman, the novel de-romanticized the heroine by switching its focus from a psychological description of romantic love to a revelation of social darkness and inequality, women's liberation, and national salvation. Set in early 1930s China, the story starts with the revelation of the fact that the heroine's father, a benevolent educator in the eyes of the public, is a hypocrite who was responsible for the death of Lin's biological mother, a rural girl who was forced to marry to Lin's father as a concubine. The father is portrayed as a typical representative to expose the cruel darkness of the marriage system in feudal society. Being abused and living a miserable life in the family, Lin has then been raised by her adoptive mother, who has used her as a ready source of money by marrying her to a wealthy man. Lin runs away from home and started her bildung journey of becoming a Communist revolutionary.

Overall, the theme of sisterly sentiment, which often holds special significance in the heroine's awakening to her sexuality, self-identification, and social agency in the literary genre of the female bildungsroman, is reduced to a drop in the ocean of an extremely long volume containing about four hundred thousand words. It has been de-selected through the creation of a sense of distance between the female friends and the intensifying masculine domination that is consolidated with the switch from psychological projection to a critical revelation of social reality. As an inherent literary practice that reflected the trajectory of female development in the modern era, sisterly friendship appears at the beginning of Lin's bildung journey. Escaping from her home and the threat of the arranged marriage, Lin fails to find her relative in Yang county. The narrative indicates that two of her sisterly friends, Wang Xiaoyan and Chen Weiru, are trying



to find Lin a job in Beijing while she is lodging herself at a local elementary school in Yang county. In other words, they were Lin's supporters thousands of miles away. Returning to Beijing but determined to break away from her family, Lin lives in Wang Xiaoyan's house. As a typical feature of sisterly friendship that is constituted mainly of elements revolving around heterosexual romance, Lin tells Wang about her romantic affair with Yu Yongze as soon as she meets her in Beijing. Yet the narrative doesn't put emphasis on the representation of psychological intimacy between the two women. Wang appears merely as a strategic sisterly friend to Lin, who provides a temporary place for a homeless young female so that she, portrayed as an absolutely positive character, will not go against the patriarchal censorship of female morality. She functions as a same-sex conveyer before she enters her heterosexual marriage to Yu Yongze. Having failed to find any job to support herself as an independent woman, Lin accepts Yu's idea of living with him and moved out of Wang's house. Therefore, Wang Xiaoyan plays the role of being Lin's sisterly friend, only as a strategically inherent element of literary practice on the theme of female development, who has no function in helping Lin's awakening as a woman in institutionalized society. Another sisterly friend of Lin's, Chen Weiru, has married a rich man and become a mother when Lin returns to Beijing from Yang county. She persuades Lin to give up those unrealistic fantasies that they firmly believed in at school and to marry a man with a bright future. Lin apparently refuses to take her advice, and their friendship ends with this unhappy visit. Chen appears more as a representation of those who go back to the traditional marriage system – living a life dependent on a man – to underscore Lin's progressiveness. In stark contrast

to the textual representations that shed light on how sisterly sentimentality helps the young female achieve her social recasting through psychological intimacy, this novel creates a distance between the heroine and her sisterly friends, both practically and psychologically. They have never entered Lin's inner world. They do not appear to invoke Lin's awakening and initiate her journey to become a revolutionary, but they seem to function as a part of the end of her frustrations in the dark.

It seems that Lin's awakening is initiated by her first lover, Yu Yongze, a young man she meets at the seaside in Yang county. The narrative produces a strong sense of masculine politics. Yu is a lifesaver for Lin when she can find neither her relatives nor a job in the unfamiliar Yang county and she was being deceived into another trap of an arranged marriage. Lin is helped, guided and protected by Yu Yongze. She deeply admires him and quickly falls in love with his chivalrous disposition and scholarship. According to the narrative, on the night before she moves out of Wang Xiaoyao's house and moves in with Yu Yongze, Lin feels all the fearfulness and uncertainty of a young bride about to leave home.

"Hsiao-yen, tomorrow I shall start on a new kind of life. I'm a little afraid. But what else can I do? I've no alternative. I hope you will study harder than ever so that soon your wish will come true. You're luckier than I am! I don't know what the future holds for me..." She hung her head sadly.

"But you are far braver than I am!" exclaimed Hsiao-yen with a smile, hastily wiping away the tears that misted her glasses. "You've always shown plenty of courage in dealing with the problems of your life. I admire the way you've tackled them and you know I sympathize with your difficulties, but I can't quite make up my mind about Old Yu. Are you sure you really understand him? What guarantee have you that he'll always be true to you?"

Can you really trust him?” Hsian-yen voiced her suspicions like a faithful big sister, anxious to safeguard her from harm.<sup>80</sup>

The narrative clearly shows the typical anxiety of a young female who has been freed from the traditional domestic confinement, is educated through the modern education system, and is about to marry a man she loves. At this point, the narrative goes naturally along the paradigm of the female developmental trajectory at the time – a new woman who is liberated, educated, enjoying free love, and confessing her anxiety to her intimate sisterly friend about her new life in marriage and uncertainty for the future before she marries a man. It seems that Wang Xiaoyan, as the sisterly figure that Lin met in school, is indeed playing the role of conveying Lin to her next developmental stage of maturation – providing a house for Lin to live in when she is homeless, so that Lin can go through the patriarchal censorship of female morality, becoming a figure to whom Lin can confess her romantic relationship with Yu Yongze, then comforting and encouraging Lin when she feels extremely anxious the night before she marries Yu. Being a faithful big sister, Wang hopes Lin can have a happy and peaceful life, as a wife and as a mother, which, however, goes against Lin’s ambitions of women’s liberation and nation-building. After moving in with Yu in Beijing, Lin gradually finds out that he was no more than a selfish person who is concerned only with himself and does not like to help Lin and the subaltern. She remains unhappy because they have different life values, and she is financially dependent on him until she meets some Communist revolutionaries whose revolutionary ideas greatly inspire her. It is

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<sup>80</sup> Mo Yang, *The Song of Youth*, trans. Nan Ying (Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1964), 79.

not until this moment that Lin's bildung journey of becoming a determined revolutionary is truly initiated. Her sisterly friends and her first lover appear in the period when she is looking for the way – her own way that is consistent with the self – to become a social individual, but keeps getting frustrated with her failures. In other words, Lin's awakening is in fact first achieved through a negation of the life value represented by her sisterly friends and Yu Yongze.

On the other hand, Lin's frustration reflects the social reality of women's liberation at the time, which was indeed a reason for both the forming and the ending of sisterly sentiment. As modern education institutions quickly developed in the big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, young females had the opportunity to attend school to be educated, and at the same time they entered a space to develop same-sex friendship as their first homo-social relationships. Through the literary representations, we find that this female same-sex interpersonal relationship primarily revolves around women's heterosexual romances and their concerns for the future. Liberated from the confinement of the kinship system and educated in modern institutions, women still could not find jobs in the institutionalized society, which, practically, was not quite prepared for women's liberation and social equality. In other words, it was hard for an educated and liberated new woman to finally become a financially independent subject with full social agency. Stepping out of the domestic confinement, the uneasiness of going back to their domestic roles through heterosexual marriage, and the uncertainty for the future caused anxiety. This was precisely the transitional stage for the young female to build up the self through social recasting, in which sisterly friendship emerged and served as a medium to help the young female finally achieve her

awakening and carry her into the next developmental stage of becoming a woman through heterosexual marriage, while the sisterly friendship would end with her marriage, at the same time. In the story, Lin's failure to find a job is a real reflection of this process. The problematic of women's liberation lay in the fact that women were liberated only to the extent of being an integral part of the poor and the lower social class and remaining subordinated to the dominant discourse of masculinity. This problematic situation of women's liberation is also revealed through Lin's sisterly friend Chen Weiru's final choice of marrying a rich man, and more directly, through Yu Yongze's response to Lin Daojing's eagerness to be independent: "I have no objection! I have always been against confining women to the kitchen. But this is a social problem. What if you can't find work outside?"<sup>81</sup>

In fact, it seems that Lin has already been awakened before she met the Communist revolutionaries. There is an automaticity to her awakening to social agency. She resists arranged marriage, which might have provided her with financial security, like her sisterly friend, Chen Weiru. She is eager to lead a financially independent life. She has a strong patriotic sentiment and is interested in student demonstrations and social movements against the Japanese invasion. The Communist revolutionaries, Lu Jiachuan, Luo Dafang, and Xu Ning, whom she meets are more like comrades in her search for an already awakened self in the darkness of the society – she finally finds a group of people who have the same life values and the same ambition of nation-building. The theme of sisterly sentimentality – a significant element in the transitional

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 82.

stage of women's self-development, and a psychological construction for women's subjectivity, yet normally going against the dominant discourse of nation-building represented by masculine politics – was de-selected as a writing strategy to foil the heroine's self-awakening in social agency and reduced to merely an inherent literary practice in the long volume of female bildungsroman. It seems that all of Lin's miserable suffering in the family, the news of the Japanese invasion, the anti-Japanese protests around her, and her final meeting with the Communist revolutionaries are set as built-in surroundings to provide a clear direction for her awakening and her bildung to become a female revolutionary. In contrast, sisterly sentimentality and her romantic love for Yu Yongze, as elements constituting the intensive notion of romanticism, have been introduced as frustrations in the darkness of her search for the self.

It is also worth noting that this novel that centers on the image of a young female's bildung journey to become a Communist revolutionary was first published in 1958, about a decade after the Chinese revolution, in which a series of political movements and agricultural reforms operated nationally, aiming to construct an independent Communist China in opposition to the West. Therefore, the political and social context at the moment largely intervened in the content of the novel – how Lin Daojing firmly believes in the Communist ideas and becomes a committed revolutionary, and how she plays an active role in the land reform movement in rural areas. According to Cai Xiang, in Chinese literature between 1949 and 1966, a number of representations and narrations about youth created a particular literary image of the young people who bravely sacrificed their lives and contributed to the success of the Chinese revolution. This

youthful imagery denoted a demand for constructing a new kind of subjectivity, which is at the same time historic and futuristic.<sup>82</sup> Cai writes, “Within the politics of the Chinese revolution itself, there was a built-in need for the construction of subjectivity. Within different historical contexts, the constitutive discourse of subjectivity changed in relation to policies and tactics, ranging, for example, from class to nation, united front, and political consultation.”<sup>83</sup> The image of Lin Daojing, therefore, was not only portrayed as a young female who bravely broke the feudalistic fetters and became a determined revolutionary who passionately contributed to nation-building in the Chinese revolution, but also as a model to guide the youths who were born and lived in 1950s and 1960s China, so that the political discourse for a Communist new China – being independent, progressive and standing in opposition to the western imperialism, was consolidated and operated. The literary images of the youth represented by Lin Daojing also metaphorically symbolized the growth of a young China. In other words, the developmental trajectory of Lin Daojing played a significant role in contributing, expressing, and representing the state discourse. Such literary narratives continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and achieved their peak in the Cultural Revolution.

### ***The Red Detachment of Women: De-sophistication in the Quest for Exterior Uniformity***

The Cultural Revolution, officially dated between 1966 and 1976 and still denounced as simply a ten-year period of social chaos by the official discourse, has been a long nightmare for

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<sup>82</sup> Xiang Cai, *Revolution and Its Narratives, China's Socialist Literary and Cultural Imaginaries (1949-1966)*, trans. Rebecca E. Karl and Xueping Zhong (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 145-6.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

Chinese intellectuals and artists, who at first enthusiastically welcomed the birth of a new China. They deeply believed they would have a peaceful and bright future in a newly united nation, yet went through all the hardships in nation-wide political movements, one after another, starting from the 1950s. Having been labeled “rightists” and “counter-revolutionary revisionists,” Chinese intellectuals faced the largest wave of ideological censorship operated by the state, in which the older generation was severely criticized and punished, while the younger generation was sent to the remote countryside to learn from workers and farmers. The Chinese intellectuals, as the main population under attack, completely lost their social position in an upside-down world. Literature undertook the tasks of consolidating ideological unity and reinforcing the slogans and guidelines set out by the Party. A de-sophistication in both literary form and content took place in literary creation to produce the image of strong, determined, and committed revolutionaries, and at the same time being avoid crushed by the strict censorship. As a result, the inner turmoil and psychological struggles that constructed modern individuality completely disappeared and were replaced by political comradeship that was developed with the same aspirations of the Chinese revolution and the construction of a new socialist China; in terms of literary form, model operas with the theme of revolution were created and dominated the national stage during this period. In a word, literature became completely political and didactic in nature.

Based on a true story about a special all-female company of 120 women in the Chinese Red Army during the 1930s, on Hainan Island, Liu Wenshao worked out the first literary version



entitled “The Red Detachment of Women”红色娘子军 as a piece of reportage published in 1957.<sup>84</sup> Adapted from Liang Xin’s script and the 1961 film of the same title, the ballet of *The Red Detachment of Women* premiered in 1964 with great success, and was later made one of the Eight Model Operas during the Cultural Revolution. The same title story was re-adapted into Beijing Opera, films, and TV series many times and remains very popular today. Featuring breathtakingly paced rhythm and a new type of dance drama by absorbing elements from the Beijing Opera into the western tradition of ballet, the ballet version was considered a brilliant classic, breaking through the historical limitations of the political overtones in the special period it was created, and has become part of the permanent repertoire of the National Ballet of China. It was performed for Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger during their historic visit to Beijing in 1972. In July 2015, the ballet was performed as one of China’s most famous ballets at the Lincoln Center Festival in New York. As the most successful propaganda spectacle, the performance of *The Red Detachment of Women* on today’s stage arouses a strong sentiment of nostalgia for the generation of people who had been inspired by Mao Zedong and experienced the “Great Cultural Revolution” when they were young.

Set in a beautiful coconut grove on Hainan Island and portraying a unit of female soldiers, the story was completely removed from any hint of romance, but was all about revolution and liberation. Without any representation of psychological sophistication, the dance drama aimed to

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<sup>84</sup> Qingdong Kong, “Hongse Niangzijun de Banben 红色娘子军的版本” in *Academics* 学术界, No. 5 (May, 2014), 185-6.

show a consistency of people's determined revolutionary minds through the uniformity of all the exterior elements – the uniforms, the dance movements, the gestures and the facial expressions. In stark contrast to the stereotypes that center on the female community, in which young females developed sentimental intimacy in their searching for the self and their struggle for self-identification and heterosexual romances, as well as to the traditional ballet works in which the heroine fell in love with the male protagonist, who was usually portrayed as a hero, the assumed intimate tenderness between young females in this dance drama has been wiped out and replaced by an overwhelming representation of the revolutionary discourse. The wearing of military uniforms, the carrying of rifles, and the clear-cut and concise dance movements and gestures that show a determined will, participation in battles, and even their stern faces, all created the sense of revolution. The female soldiers are foregrounded on the stage as fighting alongside the men for revolution. In Act Four, there is a very short section that seems to be not very closely associated with the determined fighting will for revolution. Taking a break from their practice, five female soldiers enjoy a playful time at the riverbank. They laugh and romp around. Mainly consisting of uniform leaps, the section is, however, more likely to show women's bliss in the collective life of the army rather than hinting any psychological intimacy of female sentimentality. This section quickly ends with the appearance of a male cookhouse soldier, and is immediately followed by a visit by local residents and an army-civilian celebration. The ballet was intended to demonstrate women's sublimed collective life under the guidance of the Red Army and the Chinese Communist Party, rather than representing the psychological

transformation from a young female in the domestic structure to a social individual, though the female soldiers are apparently at the developmental stage of such a transition. As institutional society had been reduced to a Communist military camp with a clear slogan of “serving the people,” the instability and uncertainty in search for the self is thoroughly replaced by a determined will for revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party. The heroine, Wu Qinghua, who survives the cruel torture of the local tyrant Nanbatian, is directly guided by Hong Changqing, a political commissar of the Chinese Communist, to join the Red Army, where she becomes a female soldier through everyday practice and the learning of revolutionary principles. The inner self has been built via all the exterior elements into a “Red Heart.”

A story of good and bad, light and dark, Communists and landlords, the ballet shows a very clear binary of gender relations, or a gender hierarchy, by portraying the male protagonist, Hong Changqing, as a combat hero and an absolute leader of the all-female company. Always standing erect, head raised and chest out, Hong Changqing, a male political commissar, directs the heroine to join the Red Army, leads the female soldiers, and is finally captured by Nanbatian in a battle and killed for saving the combat plans. The central theme of the story, women’s liberation, is, however, not only helped and guided by, but also led and protected by a male leader, and finally realized through his selfless sacrifice at the end. In this sense, the portrayal of such an all-female company serves as a foil for masculine politics. Under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, which was represented through a masculine discourse, women, as an integration of the weak and the vulnerable, were assumed to be not appropriate for battle and revolution. They

were liberated from the oppression of the local landlord and further grew into revolutionary soldiers who embodied the revolutionary subjective of being strong, determined and progressive. In this way, women, and women's liberation, was completely assimilated into the grand narrative of revolution represented by an absolute leadership of masculine politics. In *The Red Detachment of Women*, the heroine, Wu Qinghua, is portrayed as a representative of the weak oppressed by the local tyrant – the main enemy of the people and the main target of attack in the battle liberating the coconut grove. To sum up, by portraying an all-female company in the Red Army, the ballet illustrated a new form of women's community in which a built-in political subject who suffered all kinds of oppression from the darkness of the “old” China was now saved, guided, and finally liberated by the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. In contrast to sisterly same-sex sentimentality featuring an intensive sense of romanticism, this community was a gendered political alliance serving the function of praising the glory of the Chinese Communist Party. That is, women, who had been normally assumed as a vulnerable integration of the weak that needed to be protected and guided, now were capable of fighting against enemies with arms and became revolutionary soldiers under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. The search for an inner self had been replaced by a built-in autonomy of political awakening in complicity with an exterior uniformity that was represented by a sameness of facial expression, clothing, and movements. The image of the female soldier was, in fact, created as a gender strategy in two layers to serve the manipulation of masculine politics – a population of the weak that needed to be saved and liberated from the oppression of old feudalism, and a gender

category that needed to be protected and guided by men as the enlightened ones who dominated the progress of human society. It is also worth noting that such a literary image of revolutionary women is a continuation of the discursive celebration of the success of the Chinese revolution on the one hand; on the other hand, it is also a production of the political propaganda at the peak of the Cultural Revolution in praise of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. In the discursive reconstruction of women in relation to Chinese modernization in the decades after the Cultural Revolution, the former function – a population committed to the Chinese revolution – has been reserved in a gradual receding of the latter role that eulogizes the leadership of the Party. That is to say, in the case of Chinese modernization, gender politics, upon which women were mobilized to consolidate the framework of the nation-state, has played a role in weakening women's political empowerment in the meanwhile. It is, to a certain extent, in the latter process – the intention of gradually reducing women's participation in politics by reinforcing the framework of the state/Party – that a re-emergence of female sentimentality centers on feminine details, and psychological intimacy takes place and re-constructs the discourse of women's subjectivity in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the period from the 1940s to the end of the Cultural Revolution, women's participation in revolution, labor and other social activities outside the household invoked a parallel transition in literary representation. This involved a switch from an emphasis on women's inner turmoil and psychological struggles in search of a modern self to a didactic reflection of how women, under the guidance of the Communist ideas, freed themselves from miserable sufferings in the "old"

China and became social individuals through various practices outside the household in the construction of a socialist new China. This interior-exterior transition in literary representation parallels to the real result of women's liberation: a liberation that indeed provided women with social positions after the period of the Republican era in the 1920s and the 1930s, when they had the opportunity for education but remained uncertain towards their futures. They often had to return to their domestic roles through marriage, due to the social reality that did not really offer many positions to women. The transition was at the same time a strengthening and a consolidation of masculine politics in the creation of uniformity. This uniformity de-feminized women by breaking the gender norms about "inside" and "outside" work. Ironically, such creation of social equality was by no means a real equality for women; it paradoxically eliminated the gender differential, as women were completely assimilated into the monolithic discourse of masculinity. The political propaganda after the 1950s generated a discontinuity in terms of the changes in people's lives before and after the Liberation, and at the same time created a continuity of the representations centering on the theme of revolution, so that the images of a delayed fixity on the Chinese revolution was produced and reproduced in complicity with the state discourse of nation-building, and finally developed into a natural slippage into eulogizing the absolute leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao in the Cultural Revolution.

Although literary representations during the Cultural Revolution have been criticized for their tediousness, clichés and didactics, the Cultural Revolution in fact has had a far-reaching

influence on the Chinese literary productions created from the 1980s to the present. The de-sophistication, paradoxically, promoted sophistication in the discourse of literary criticism during the new era of economic reform as a traceable representation of the political discourse at a time that asked us to rethink it critically; the de-selections were re-selected, or were re-discovered as a revelation of different life stories of ordinary people beneath the state discourse of the time to reconstruct our imagination of the Cultural Revolution. While literary works were politically produced as propaganda tools to create exterior uniformity during the Cultural Revolution, representations of people's lives produced after the 1980s, with settings in the Cultural Revolution, showed an immediate reversal turning from outside to inside. The Cultural Revolution was reproduced as a traumatic memory of Chinese intellectuals who completely lost their proper social positions during the decade, and who, returning from the remote farms to their desks with their pens, were eager to pour out their innermost thoughts about the sufferings and tragic experiences as the ending of a living nightmare. In the late 1970s, this theme developed into a distinct literary genre called "Scar Literature," which initiated the literary creation of ordinary people's lives in the ten-year chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Female sentimentality as an interpersonal emotion featuring privacy, details and tenderness, which went against the state discourse of revolution in the decades from the 1940s to the Cultural Revolution, now returned to the normality of traditional womanhood. As women who were passionate about literature and who spent their youth during the Cultural Revolution started writing careers in the 1980s, the theme of sisterly sentimentality re-emerged, together with the return of love stories about young

people who are now in pursuit of the self in the new era of Chinese economic reform.



## CHAPTER 3

### Elite Literature and Transnationalism

In the study of women's history within second wave feminism, any methodology that fails to take into account class and nation (race) and attempts to only make an issue of sex (gender) is regarded as invalid. Interest is focused on finding a unified understanding of these and a new methodology (Fujime, 196:17).<sup>85</sup>

Deng Xiaoping's "open-door" policy in December 1978 inaugurated China's repositioning in search of a global normativity in the world of late capitalism. The policy, initially set up to open the door to foreign businesses and to accelerate China's economic development, brought a new era for both the Chinese economy and Chinese culture. The 1980s, in retrospect, became another turn of thought liberation after the long-term political repression that started as early as the 1950s. The cultural trend in the 1980s, specifically, philosophies, thoughts, literary critiques, and aesthetics, had many traces that reminded us of the Republican era, when different ideas from the West collided with each other as well as with ideas in the East, in a tremendous social transformation. Indeed, 1980s China even had some direct connections with the Republican era. In his discussion of the literary discourse of Chinese modernism in the new era of reforms,

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<sup>85</sup> In *Nationalism and Gender*, Ueno referred to Fujime Yuki's point of women's history in *Sei no rekishi gaku* 「性の歴史学」to discuss the appropriate theoretical approach for the study of military comfort women. She believed that the comfort women issue should be discussed with a unified perspective of sex, class and nation. Moreover, criticizing the views of history that simply put priority on class, she suggested the discussion of gender history required a new type of theoretical approach that was neither male-centered and national-centric, nor the reserve side of them, universalism. See Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, trans. Beverley Yamamoto (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 100-103, 212, note 24. Here I'm citing Fujime Yuki's point as a theoretical framework for the discussion of the thematic representation of sisterly same-sex sentiment in modern Chinese literature in the new era of Chinese economic reform, namely, from the 1980s to the 1990s.

Zhang Xudong pointed out that Western modernism, which had been introduced into China in the early twentieth-century, left its traces and influences in modern Chinese literature by being assimilated and transformed into the major literary schools of realism and romanticism, by founders of modern Chinese literature, such as Lu Xun, Mao Dun and Guo Moruo. In the early 1980s, literary productions regarding western scholars and prerevolutionary modernism, for example, Yuan Kejia's *Selected Works of Foreign Modernism*, laid the foundation for the modernism in the new era.<sup>86</sup>

A variety of “new waves,” namely, wounded literature, root-seeking literature, stream-of-consciousness, modernism, and avant-garde fiction, burst onto the literary scene in 1980s China. Chinese intellectuals were eager to establish a new discursive institution of aesthetics based on social rationality, where the individual voice could be represented. Literary innovators boldly explored themes and expressions in new forms and techniques. On the other hand, in fact, there was still an inertial force of political propaganda, if not a constant notion of political intervention in the literary field, that constituted the main content of the so-called “mainstream” literature, which remained a dominant voice in the first half of the 1980s. The official discourse, namely, mainstream literature, featured a picture of an assumed “totality” of social life under Deng's regime of reform. Tao Dongfeng pointed out, since the early stage of the new era was

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<sup>86</sup> According to Zhang Xudong, in the early 1980s, Chinese intellectuals who were eager to redefine the literary field turned to senior scholars who specialized in western literature and the survivors of prerevolutionary modernism for help. As a result, their scholarships shaped the initial perceptions and laid the foundation of modernism in the postrevolutionary age. See Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 104-5.

preoccupied with “rethinking political standpoints and revising cultural concepts,” literature in this period still focused on socialist realism, for example, the theme revolving around smashing the Gang of Four.<sup>87</sup> The other new waves, for example, modernism, intending to create a notion of the individual subject, from a political view of modern Chinese literature, remained in a marginal position, or, in Zhang Xudong’s words, were “operating as subalterns.”<sup>88</sup> In fact, so long as the state apparatus makes a commanding voice to the literary field, the official discourse will retain its influential position in literature. The fact that a variety of literary forms harmoniously co-exist with the mainstream literature is still valid for today’s market of cultural productions.

As Chinese economic reform entered the second stage from the late 1980s, when most of the state-owned industry went through a process of privatization, the notion of the individual subject became a firmly established concept, the literary field changed correspondingly. Chinese literature began to capture more of the mundane world and people’s everyday lives. Writers shifted their attention from “what to write” to “how to write,” and aimed to seek for literary autonomy.<sup>89</sup> Holding its superior position as state discourse, the mainstream literature has now gradually diminished into a solitary section that kept distance from the other literary forms. The various new literary waves have grown to a set of cultural productions that might be collectively called *elite literature*. Undertaking the mission of the construction of individual subjectivity in

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<sup>87</sup> Dongfeng Tao, “Thirty Years of New Era Literature: From Elitization to De-Elitization” in *A Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Yingjin Zhang, trans. Angie Chau (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. 2016), 100.

<sup>88</sup> Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 109.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-110.

socialist China, it demonstrated the vitality of the literary field and finally became the real “mainstream.” According to Tao Dongfeng, while literature had been invested with the task of serving the people – working class and the masses – from as early as the 1940s, reaching a culmination in the Cultural Revolution, it went through an opposite process of elitization in the new era.<sup>90</sup> This is in fact not surprising at all since Chinese intellectuals, finally, went back to their proper social positions after long suppression, in particular in the Cultural Revolution.

Elite literature featured in the literary field in the decade of the 1980s, and encountered an immediate crisis in the early 1990s. As China opened more and more in the economic field and with the rise of the marketplace, cultural production has been invested with a process of depoliticization and commercialization. As a result, from the 1990s to the present, modern Chinese literature has gone through another process, opposite to that of the last decade, that is, de-elitization.<sup>91</sup> The rise of popular literature and the growth of young writers from the new generations, along with the widespread use of computers, the internet, and smartphones, brought another new era to the literary field. I will reserve the discussion of this in detail for the next chapter. It is worth noting that even though elite literature declined, it remained very influential during the decade of the 1990s. Brilliant writers who were born in the 1950s or early 1960s, who established their reputations in the 1980s, have been still active and productive throughout the 1990s to the present.

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<sup>90</sup> Dongfeng Tao, “Thirty Years of New Era Literature: From Elitization to De-Elitization” in *A Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Yingjin Zhang, trans. Angie Chau (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. 2016), 98-9.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 102. I believe that this process of de-elitization is also closely associated with the discursive transition of post-modernity in an increasingly integrated global economy. I will further discuss this in the next chapter.

It was under this historical, social and literary context that some gifted women writers, whom I'm going to discuss in this chapter, began to emerge as acknowledged professionals in writing and have gradually taken their place alongside significant male writers as productive contributors to the literary scene. They began their writing careers with personal experiences during the hard times they lived through and came into their own as innovators. If, as Zhang Xudong pointed out, "What has been commonly taken as the early stage of post-Mao cultural production is to a large extent a literary, ideological, and even empirical recapitulation of the pre-Cultural Revolution experience,"<sup>92</sup> then from the late 1980s, women writers, along with other male authors, recaptured their experience of the Cultural Revolution with a contemplative vision as wounded survivors. Even more, they tended to break away from writing about traditional womanhood, which usually centered on domestic difficulties, or portraying women as weakened figures in gender relations; they tried various innovations in literary themes and forms as true "avant-garde." For example, Wang Anyi, touched the extremely sensitive theme of female sexuality in her trilogy of love; Can Xue used fractured narrative to convey the feeling of a fragmented ego. As a result, they not only survived the crisis of de-elitization that started from the early 1990s, but also became accomplished writers, as active contributors to cultural production in their constant exploration of wide-ranging literary themes with transnational and cross-cultural perspectives. Some of their production even bridged the gap between elite culture and mass culture and thereby constructed the transition from modernism to postmodernism. For

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<sup>92</sup> Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 122.

example, Yan Geling adapted many of her works, such as *The Flowers of War*, *Little Aunt Crane*, and *The Ninth Window*, for movies and TV series, and became a successful playwright and a popular writer for young people. In this chapter, by re-examining the works of three important women writers, Wang Anyi, Yan Geling and Hong Ying, who began their writing careers in the process of literary elitization in the 1980s and became significant figures in the Chinese contemporary literary community, I intend to show how they carried the agency of discursive transition from themes that center on domestic trauma to characters who experienced the process of globalizing urbanization with their international identities; how they have finally achieved this agency as a generation who was born in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, yet respectively represented the transitional stages of nationalism, transnationalism and internationalism with their different personal life experiences and chances, in the rapid changes in the decades of Chinese reform and economic take-off; and how the theme of sisterly same-sex sentiment has broken through the region between familial kinship and social institution and stepped forward to a full complex by being invested with the elements of nation, the transnational, and sexuality, as our heroines, together with their inventors, enter the new era of Chinese reform in the trend of globalization.

### **Wang Anyi: A Voice within the State Discourse**

There is no doubt that Wang Anyi is the most successful and influential woman writer in the Chinese contemporary literary community. Born in 1954, she has reached her leading position with a brilliant galaxy of novels, novellas, short stories, essays, and winning of literary prizes,

and she remains very productive up to the present. A daughter of the renowned writer, Ru Zhijuan, she started her own writing in the late 1970s, producing stories that reflected ordinary lives in the alleys of Shanghai. A daughter of Shanghai, Wang Anyi has been recognized as the heir of the Shanghai-style literature that was represented by Eileen Chang decades before. In his article, “Shanghai Nostalgia: Postrevolutionary Allegories in Wang Anyi’s Literary Production in the 1990s,” Zhang Xudong discussed Wang Anyi in comparison to Eileen Chang, both of whom set their base in Shanghai, and he believed the true connection between the two brilliant women writers lies in “an allegorical contemplation and a sustained narrative elaboration that transform the silence of a petrified history into a *duree* of concrete historical time.”<sup>93</sup> He further pointed out “Wang conveys a sense of history through the thicket of literary and sociological concreteness, through the ‘trivial details’ (*suosui de xijie*) that constitute the physical and mental life world with which her characters stick in a selfless fashion.”<sup>94</sup> This comment also reminds us of Rey Chow’s discussion of “feminine details” represented by Eileen Chang’s writing in the Republican era, which had been gradually deselected for the national discourse of nation building.<sup>95</sup> Wang Anyi attended an international writing program in the United States in 1983. This trip bridged her transition from writing individual experience to writing on China, and to exploring social taboo subjects of sexuality. Her groundbreaking works on the theme of carnal love, namely *Love*

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<sup>93</sup> Xudong Zhang, “Shanghai Nostalgia: Postrevolutionary Allegories in Wang Anyi’s Literary Production in the 1990s” in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Volume 8, Number 2, Fall 2000, 357.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 359-60.

<sup>95</sup> See Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 84-96.

*on a Barren Mountain* 荒山之恋 (1986), *Love in a Small Town* 小城之恋 (1986), and *Brocade Valley* 锦绣谷之恋 (1987) made a breakthrough in women's writing by investing modern Chinese literature with a woman's voice depicting sexuality. In the following years, she further expanded her writings to a variety of themes and settings to represent a collective history of modern China. As a matter of fact, one of her early novellas, *Di Xiong Men* 弟兄们 (*Brothers*, 1989), touched on the extremely sensitive theme of female homosexuality.

Reversing the domination of masculine discourse, *Brothers* tells a story of three married women who developed a sisterly relationship in college. From the very beginning, the story reverses the conventional notion of women's domestic role of being wives. Corresponding with the title "Brothers," the three women address each other as the Eldest, the Second, and the Third, while they address their husbands as "the one in their families," which was normally applied when addressing married women. Their husbands have become their topic of teasing in the dorm. They think men have been assimilated by women and lost their ego, while they cannot imagine a world without the gender identity of man, indicating that the gender issue cannot be solved with a simple reversal. Being liberated from the constraint of marriage, they feel that their selves are re-awakened in their everyday company on campus. As they graduate from the college and go back to their families in different places, the sentimental intimacy remains as a kind of paradise lost in their memories.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Fran Martin pointed out that the most common narrative pattern in representations of female same-sex sentimentality is an intimate relationship between young females who are not married and a mournful memorial of their intimate relationship after they have married. That the theme of female same-sex relationship is most commonly represented as a paradise lost implies the social imposition of hetero-marital relations upon young



The story, on the other hand, presents a tremendous amount of ambiguity in the borders between homo-social, sisterly same-sex sentiment, and homo-erotic relationships as the narrative keeps blurring their relationships with the co-existence of heterosexual marriage, living together in the college dorm, and mutual psychological appeal and dependence. We found the intimate friendship among the three might not be simply sisterly sentiment that helps to re-discover the self, but might involve a possible transition to female homosexuality. In other words, the story sheds light on the oppression of homoerotic desire by the predominant heterosexuality, which is represented deliberately by the fact that the heroines enter the narrative with existing heterosexual marriages. All of the three women are already wives when they meet each other in college and live together in the same dorm. According to the narrative, every time Third's husband came to visit her, she felt guilty about the other two and thought their happiness was interrupted by her husband. The other two also considered her a traitor. Yet the real suspicion of female homosexuality is raised with Wang and Li's reunion several years later, after they have separated following their college graduation. Wang, living a tedious life, is very excited by Li's visit and pregnancy. Wang goes to Li's house in Shanghai to take care of Li after she has given birth to a son. She has thought the boy belongs to Li and herself, rather than to Li and her

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women as a condition of feminine adulthood. See Fran Martin, *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Culture and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6-11. I think the intimate relationship in *Brothers* is a typical representation of Martin's argument. On the other hand, indeed, taking into account the power manipulation of heterosexuality and the longtime cultural suppression of overt physical expression of sexual relations in China, some female same-sex intimacy could very possibly develop into a homoerotic relationship in the absence of oppression from the heterosexual binary, but has to be given up, given the overwhelming predominant discourse of heterosexuality. However, I question if all such representations of female same-sex relationships indicate a forcible given up. I think Martin's argument that takes the narrative pattern of women's same-sex relationships simply as "love" – love in the sense of female homoeroticism – has, somehow, ignored the variety of female same-sex relationships.

husband. They have once talked about what they would do if they fell in love with the same man, and Li's answer of killing the man moved Wang very much. The narrative indicates that, in a sense, they have reached the brink of a "dangerous" relationship, to which their sisterly friendship might have to make a transition. As we thought their same-sex relation might go beyond non-erotic sisterly sentiment to a homosexual orientation, the narrative shows that this transition turns out to be a break up due to an accidental injury to Li's son. It is not until the very end, when Li says to Wang, "I do love you," with a further interpretation of "love" as corresponding to the romantic love between the opposite sexes, that a homoerotic desire can be ultimately confirmed. Therefore, throughout the story, the situation in which the heterosexual marriage keeps being disturbed by the sentimental dependence between the two women might also indicate the changing of their same-sex relation, though there is no physical intimacy at all throughout their relationship. The co-existence of the heterosexual marriage and the same-sex sentimental intimacy has brought the female-female relationship up to an equal position with heterosexuality, which indicates that the sentiment between Wang and Li might be more than sisterly.

The story portrays a female same-sex relation that transitions from non-erotic sisterly sentiment to a female same-sex relation that might be considered a female homosexual relationship based on the masculine discourse, except for the physical intimacy. Unlike the stereotype of non-erotic sisterly sentiment, in which the sisterly figure functions as an ideal ego helping to build up the self and conveying the young female to heterosexual marriage, the three

women in this story have already married before meeting each other in the college dorm. Therefore, their sisterly sentiment has freed them from the confinement of marriage, and further provided an opposite possibility of same-sex love that goes beyond the boundary of non-erotic sisterly sentiment. As the homosexual desire is proven by the final confession of love, the ambiguity of this story in terms of the border between same-sex sentiment and homosexual relation also verifies that there is no universal mode of female-female love relationships. The predominant heterosexuality keeps open the possibility that some sisterly same-sex sentimental intimacy could go as far as homoerotic relations without the oppression from the heterosexual binary. To avoid reducing the multi-layered same-sex relations simply into the Western mode featured by “physically spontaneity,”<sup>97</sup> a returning gaze to the “aura” of China in relation to the West is indispensable. That means taking into account the longtime cultural suppression of overt physical expression in not only homoerotic relations but also in heterosexuality, so that a same-sex relationship without physical intimacy could still be homoerotic, which also contributes to the richness of same-sex love relationships.<sup>98</sup>

Being an extremely productive writer, Wang Anyi has continued to produce prominent novels in the new century, such as *Bian Di Xiao Xiong* 遍地枭雄 (*Fierce Heroes Everywhere*), *Tian Xiang* 天香 (*Scent of Heaven*), and the most recent one *Ni Ming* 匿名 (*Anonymous*) published in 2015. Among her numerous and excellent works, the 1995 novel, *The Song of*

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<sup>97</sup> Hui Xiao, “A Review of The Emerging Lesbian, Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China,” [http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/hui\\_review.html#n4](http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/hui_review.html#n4)

<sup>98</sup> See Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 65-76.

*Everlasting Sorrow* 长恨歌, remains the most famous and impressive one. An extraordinary tale of a Shanghai woman, the novel is primarily considered a production of Shanghai nostalgia, a cultural trend that emerged in the 1990s, when global capital returned and bourgeois ideology regained legitimacy, prompting a sentimental recalling of the city's past glory in the Republican era. A colonial sophistication, in which the traces of a belonging to the system of global capital in the past were now glittering again, produced a post-Mao obsession with seeking the origin of the city's cosmopolitan history that dated back to decades ago before the Chinese revolution.<sup>99</sup> The novel is closely associated with the city of Shanghai, as not only a social background, but also an exterior element that constructs the heroine's innermost character formation. In the beginning, the narrative tells us that, from a bird's eye view, this city consisted of *longtang* alleyways, a true essence of Shanghai and the real carrier of Shanghai history – a stark contrast to people's image of Shanghai as a pioneer of Chinese modernity and a metropolis in the 1990s. The heroine, Wang Qiyao, is a former Miss Shanghai, whose life led from the *longtang* to the stage and lived most of her life in the *longtang*. She is therefore a true daughter of Shanghai, who retained the disposition of the Shanghai middle class – a class that formed its identity in the “good old days,” and which has now receded with the rise of new values and esthetics of the young generation in the rapid development of the market-oriented economy. The withdrawal of this old generation of the middle class was by no means a simple replacement, but a complex mix in which the changes that were brought by the return of global capital ideologically and substantially existed with the

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<sup>99</sup> Xudong Zhang, “Shanghai Nostalgia: Postrevolutionary Allegories in Wang Anyi's Literary Production in the 1990s” in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Volume 8, Number 2, Fall 2000, 353-6.

old traces left from more than a half century before. It is such complexity that aroused a sentimental nostalgia in the old generation of the middle class, who might not belong to the contemporary middle class any more, yet the representations of this nostalgia have also evoked sympathy among younger people, since they have been embracing the return of global capital that created the city's past glory.

The novel is the life story of Wang Qiyao, a typical daughter of the Shanghai *longtang*, who wins third place in the Miss Shanghai competition in the 1940s and becomes a concubine of a KMT military official. She then spends the rest of her life back in the *longtang* and is finally murdered by her daughter's friend's boyfriend in the 1980s. The narrative introduces Wang Qiyao as a representation of a particular population of young females – “Behind every doorway in the Shanghai *longtang* a Wang Qiyao is studying, embroidering, whispering secrets to her sisters, or throwing a teary-eyed tantrum at her parents.”<sup>100</sup> Our heroine is one of hundreds of Wang Qiyaos who are beautiful, sentimental, diligent, honest, loyal and devoted, living in the *longtang* and following the fashion trends as the city's embodiment. In particular, there is a passage describing sisterly love as one of the characteristics of Wang Qiyaos, indicating that such sisterly sentiment is one of the fundamental elements that constitute the exteriority of this group of young females:

Between the Wang Qiyaos is a sisterly love, sometimes strong enough to last a lifetime.

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<sup>100</sup> Anyi Wang, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, trans. Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 25.

Whenever they get together, they regress back to the days before they were married. They are symbols to each other of that innocent period in their lives, living monuments or witnesses on whom to rely when recalling lost times. Many things in their lives are replaceable, but this sisterly love remain until death. Sisterly love is a strange thing indeed: it is not the kind of love that endures through thick and thin and inspires one to help a friend when she is down – it recognizes no attachments, no responsibilities. Rootless and unfettered, it offers no security. You cannot really say that these girls keep each other as confidants – after all, just how many secrets do women store up in their hearts? Most often they are there to keep one another company, but not in any intimate way – they simply keep each other company on the way to and from school, sporting the same hairstyle, wearing identical shoes and socks, and walking hand-in-hand like lovers. If you should ever see a pair of young girls like this on the street, don't ever mistake them for twins. It's simply sisterly love – Wang Qiyao style.

They depend so much on each other, they treat each other with such exaggerated affection, and their expressions are so earnest that you can't help but take their relationship seriously. But when they keep one another company, all they are doing is making loneliness lonelier and helplessness even more helpless, because neither is in a position to do anything for the other. Divested of utilitarian motives, their sisterly love is all the more pure. Every Wang Qiyao is accompanied by another; some are classmates, some neighbors, and others cousins. This relationship is one of the few social activities in their chaste, simple lives. They have too few opportunities for social interaction and so when an opportunity arises they cannot help putting everything they have into it – and the result is sisterly love. The Wang Qiyaos of the world all place great importance on friendship; beneath a façade that chases after the latest fashions there is devotion and sincerity – albeit a somewhat detached sincerity. When one Wang Qiyao walks down the aisle, another Wang Qiyao is her maid of honor; it is a way of paying tribute to her, a way of seeing her off into her new life. The expression on the face of the maid of honor shows that she is yielding the spotlight to the bride. Her dress is a shade less bright, the style is from the last year, she intentionally applies less rouge to her face than usual – everything speaks of her willingness to lower her banner. This attitude of heroic self-sacrifice is sisterly love.<sup>101</sup>

This is exactly the sisterly same-sex sentiment that I am discussing in this study. We see a vague image of the unhappy tiff between Sophie, Yufang and Jianru at the cinema in Ding Ling's

*Miss Sophie's Diary*, as well as Lu Yin's romanticism of sisterly community in *Old*

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<sup>101</sup> Anyi Wang, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, trans. Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 24-25.

*Acquaintances at the Seashore*. This is what we have discussed at the beginning of the chapter on the Republican era – it has been constantly reconstructed through contemporary repetitions as a social context providing the historical sophistication of Chinese modernity. Writers present contemporary anxiety – in this novel, a sentimental nostalgia – through the old stories of civilization in the distant past. As in Owen’s discussion of memory in the narratives of Chinese classical literature, the Republican era has “intruded into the ongoing present and commands our attention: we ‘dwell on it.’”<sup>102</sup>

Let’s examine the characteristics that define a relationship of same-sex sisterly sentiment through this very detailed literary description of sisterly love between Wang Qiyaos. Sisterly love, literarily in Chinese *xiao zimei qingyi* 小姊妹情谊, a friendship between sisterly young females, is a non-erotic same-sex relationship for company before they are married. It is all about a stage of female development that will naturally move to the next step – heterosexual marriage. A young female will be the maid of honor in her ‘sister’s’ wedding ceremony. She goes to accompany her as a witness of the innocent period in their lives – the days before they were married. Such company in the wedding ceremony is also a farewell to those days that they will lose from the day of the wedding – “a way of paying tribute to her, a way of seeing her off into her new life.” In other words, in the wedding ceremony, which is considered a milestone in the process of female maturation, the sisterly figure serves as the final company of her transition from “daughter” to “woman.” Second, the sisterly figure primarily and most likely emerges from

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<sup>102</sup> Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 102.

the young female's classmates. The establishment and development of the modern education system at the beginning of twentieth-century China allowed young females to attend school as their first social institution outside of the family. The sex-segregated school system, running its administration to strictly follow a binary framework of heterosexuality in order to protect the virtue of female students, provided both a space and a population in which young girls could develop same-sex friendships. Third, the narrative also reveals two features of sisterly sentiment – being non-replaceable and imitation. A pair of young girls walk hand-in-hand like twins, having the same hairstyle and wearing identical shoes and socks. It is reasonable to infer that such imitation may have a far-reaching impact on the critical choices for the significant stages in their lives. As a psychologically intimate relationship that is strong enough to last a lifetime, it helps the young females with their recognition of self-identification and marriage, as well as their choice of a life philosophy. Last, but not the least, it indicates how sisterly love comes into being – a social reality at the beginning of women's liberation, moving toward gender equality. As the narrative reveals, "they have too few opportunities for social interaction and so when an opportunity arises they cannot help putting everything they have into it – and the result is sisterly love." In other words, this same-sex relationship is an attachment derived from the historical complexity of the rise of feminism and the development of the modern education system in an unprepared society that is based on the framework of the heterosexual binary, with long time oppression of women.

In *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, sisterly sentiment initiates the storyline and



accompanies the heroine throughout her life. As the passage on sisterly love above informs us, Wang Qiyao's two most important sisterly friends, Wu Peizhen and Jiang Lili, are both her classmates in high school. Wu Peizhen, Wang Qiyao's first best girlfriend, appears with Wang Qiyao at her debut. Wu was Wang's best friend in high school. Coming from a well-to-do family, she is a careless, modest and outgoing girl with an unattractive appearance. She appreciates Wang Qiyao's beauty, and her magnanimity of being a sisterly friend to her. She therefore always tries to please Wang to repay her kindness. Wu's cousin does lighting at a film studio, a place surrounding the lives of film stars and closely associated with the romance that young females are eager to see. Wu takes Wang to see the film studio as a gift that she could offer to Wang Qiyao. The forty-year story of Wang Qiyao in fact starts precisely with Wu's flattering proposal to go to the film studio. It was her experience at this film studio that gave Wang the chance to know Mr. Cheng, an amateur photographer who became hopelessly fascinated with Wang's beauty and brought her the reputation of "A Proper Young Lady of Shanghai," through which she takes the first step to shake off her mediocre family and achieve her ambition of insinuating herself into the upper class. Wu's feelings for Wang Qiyao were a bit like the puppy love, without any erotic intention, that "a teenage boy feels for a girl for whom he is willing to go to the edge of the earth."<sup>103</sup> Sometimes, her feeling for Wang Qiyao was a bit like maternal love – a love that encompassed all.<sup>104</sup> Their sisterly friendship deepens through their frequent visits to the

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<sup>103</sup> Anyi Wang, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, trans. Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 29.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

film studio and finally ends up with Wang's failed screen test at the film studio. The narrative describes their parting at Jiang Lili's house, revealing that sisterly sentiment is a pure and non-replaceable relationship, deeply and exclusively embedded in the inner self of girl students:

After a long silence, they both began to cry. They didn't know what they were crying for, or what there was that was even worth crying about, but deep down both were overcome by a sadness for what they had once had and what was now irretrievably lost....With their handkerchiefs soaked in tears, they still couldn't say what was wrong, all they knew was that they were profoundly sad. It was as if their girlhood, so carefree and pure, were gone forever, and from that point on their lives would become much more complicated.<sup>105</sup>

Wu Peizhen visits Wang Qiyao again at Alice Apartments when Wang becomes a military official's concubine. Being a non-replaceable sisterly figure for a lifelong friendship, Wang Qiyao is her best and only friend. She has always felt that Jiang Lili has snatched Wang Qiyao from her. Before she leaves for Hong Kong with her husband's family, Wu invites Wang to go to Hong Kong with her for a better life, while Wang's determination to stay in Shanghai for her lover, Director Li, makes this visit their last goodbye and at the same time indicates that a non-erotic sisterly relationship is usually interrupted by heterosexual romance.

After her photo, taken by Mr. Cheng, is chosen for the inside cover spread of the magazine, *Shanghai Life*, Wang Qiyao became a celebrity on campus, and a lot of girl students wanted to make friends with her. One of the several classmates who wants to take Wu Peizhen's place,

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 65.

Jiang Lili finally becomes Wang's best friend after Wang accepts her invitation to Jiang's birthday party. She is also the most significant sisterly friend who accompanies Wang as she passed through her important moments from youth to middle age. Jiang Lili is one of the wealthiest girls in the class, and Wang Qiyao is curious about Jiang Lili's party at her house. Wu Peizhen's proposal to visit the film studio introduces her to the photographer Mr. Cheng, through whom Wang Qiyao becomes a magazine celebrity and wins the title of "A Proper Young Lady of Shanghai," while Jiang Lili's invitation to her birthday party brings Wang into passion and romance-filled parties, a social activity for young females at the time and the very heart of Shanghai nightlife. It is Mr. Cheng who suggests that Wang Qiyao enter the Miss Shanghai pageant. While Wang is still hesitating about accepting his suggestion, Jiang Lili suddenly announces Mr. Cheng's proposal at the wedding reception of one of Jiang Lili's distant cousins, which pushes Wang Qiyao to finally decide to grab this opportunity. Jiang Lili is busy preparing everything for Wang's beauty queen bid, making a cheongsam for the day of the pageant, dragging Wang off to party after party, garnering votes, and inviting Wang to live with her at her house, until Wang finally wins third place in the pageant. Thus, the sisterly friends functioned as steps in the life trajectory of Wang's life, as she steps out of her family and onto the stage of society, the stage of her individual life.

The relation between Wang Qiyao and Jiang Lili, as a typical representation of sisterly sentiment, demonstrates that both the sisterly figure and sisterly love have nothing to do with the same-sex love transition induced by homoerotic inclinations; on the contrary, both of them are

closely intertwined with a strong notion of heterosexual romance. The narrative indicates that heterosexual romances have always been involved in sisterly sentimentality: “One man and two women was the most common grouping of lovers to be found in 1946.”<sup>106</sup> In the lifelong companionship between Wang Qiyao and Jiang Lili, their friendship is broken off once, after the Miss Shanghai competition. Wang is looking for an excuse to move out of Jiang’s home; at the same time, she starts to date Mr. Cheng, who is also deeply adored by Jiang Lili. Whenever Jiang Lili cannot stand the torment of her love for Mr. Cheng and pours her heart out to Wang Qiyao, Wang feels distressed, and it is too hard to tell her the truth. Jiang Lili finally sees the love poems that Mr. Cheng had inscribed on Wang’s photos. This revelation utterly destroys her love and her friendship, to both of which she had dedicated her whole heart. The first break-off of their friendship is therefore caused by the romantic triangle among the three. A complex entanglement with heterosexual love, sisterly sentiment often appears as a non-erotic alternative to heterosexual love. Wang Qiyao was invited to a grand opening, where she meets Director Li, a towering figure in the military who decides to ask Wang Qiyao to the ceremony and who finally became Wang’s first lover. The message requesting her presence arrives the same day that Wang moves out of Jiang’s house, indicating a temporary ending of her sisterly relationship with Jiang Lili and a replacement with a heterosexual affair.

The relationship between Wang and Jiang resumes after a long period of Wang’s heterosexual relationships with Director Li, Kang Mingxun and Sasha. The span of time is

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 85.

created by a dramatic change of the heroine's identity and social context. Returning to Shanghai after a secret vacation at her grandmother's hometown in Wu Bridge, a small town where she can escape from the chaos of the world, Wang Qiyao, a social celebrity who has won third place in the Miss Shanghai contest, becomes a nurse providing injection services in Peace Lane. Between fall 1948 and the early 1950s, however, the social context of the city of Shanghai dramatically changes, from the great turmoil at the end of the civil war to a new peaceful place in an ideologically unified Communist China. Topographically, Wang Qiyao moves from Alice Apartments, a quiet, mysterious and lonely island in the bustling city where "society girls" can wait for their lovers, to Peace Lane, one of hundreds of twisting, dirty lanes in Shanghai. Even though the name of the place where she lives, Peace Lane, implies a notion of a peaceful life for ordinary people, as a contrast to the unrest at "Alice" Apartments in western-style, Wang Qiyao's inner world still belongs to Alice Apartments. In Peace Lane, she quickly becomes friends with people who also yearn for the splendid world of the past and thereby see themselves as being out of place. Jiang Lili comes back into her life when Wang Qiyao is undergoing hardship because of her illicit pregnancy. Although she is not intentionally coming to help Wang go through her hardship, her return as an important companion does enrich Wang's daily life. They visit each other frequently for daily trifles, provoking a strong nostalgia for their school days of the past. Again, the sisterly relationship is closely associated with heterosexual romance – Jiang's return is brought about by Mr. Cheng. An unexpected encounter with Mr. Cheng at a consignment store draws Wang Qiyao back to the old memories and friends. He invites Jiang Lili to visit Wang

Qiyao together with him when Jiang is looking for Wang Qiyao as someone who can certify her studies in high school to complete her paper work for her Communist Party application. Feeling that it is hard to take the one last step with Wang Qiyao, Mr. Cheng finally asks Jiang Lili to look out for her. It seems that the return of Mr. Cheng in the narrative works as a device for Wang Qiyao's reunion with Jiang Lili so that the sisterly relationship between the two could be resumed. Therefore, on one hand, sisterly sentiment is a same-sex relationship derived from the heterosexual framework; on the other hand, heterosexual romance constructs the main body of sisterly sentiment, and sometimes, it even works for this female same-sex relationship. Their sisterly relationship finally ends with Jiang Lili's death from cancer in 1965, one year before the start of the Cultural Revolution, when Mr. Cheng ends his life by suicide.

### **Yan Geling: From Transnationalism to Nationalism**

Another significant woman writer in contemporary Chinese literature, Yan Geling, four years younger than Wang Anyi and also coming from a literary family, brings the vision of transnationalism into women's writing and contemporary Chinese literature. The daughter of a writer, Yan Geling began her own writing career from her personal experiences as a dancer in the People's Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution in Tibet, as a war correspondent in the Sino-Vietnamese War, and then as a student abroad in the United States. From her first novel, *Lü Xue* 绿血 (*Green Blood*, 1985), to her most recent book *Wu Nan* 舞男 (*A Male Dancer*, 2016), she has become one of the most productive writers in China. Writers are natural narrators of their personal experiences. Most of her early stories incorporated the elements of dance, Tibet, and life

in the army, with the historical background of the Cultural Revolution. Many of her stories emphasize reversals. For example, her short story, *Daotang He* 倒淌河 (*A River Flows Upstream*, 1995) is set along a river that flows from east to west in the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province, metaphorically indicating that the Cultural Revolution was a regression of history. Such reversal indicates a re-thinking of history from a different perspective, a perspective different from, if not opposite to the normal view. Over the course of Yan Geling's fiction, there has also been a reversal in the transition from her early works that feature transnationalism to more recent novels that convey a notion of nationalism, for example, from *Xiaoyu* 少女小渔 (1993) and *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* 扶桑 (1996), to *Little Aunt Crane* 小姨多鹤 (2008) and *Di Jiu Ge Guanfu* 第九个寡妇 (*The Ninth Widow*, 2008).

Weaving the twisted lives of ordinary people into the grand narrative of history, Yan Geling's stories have always been closely associated with the writing of history. Brave in touching on the forbidden periods and re-discovering the facts beneath the state discourse, her writings reveal the historical scars that have been thematically de-selected for literary representations. The theme of female sentimentality therefore has been invested with a sophistication of multiple elements from bigger categories, such as morality, gender, politics, war, race and nation. By asking if there is "a destiny that transcends the dichotomy of male and female," and having a body with a uterus and ovaries, if it is possible that she's not without a choice,<sup>107</sup> one of her signature works, *White Snake* 白蛇 (1998), acutely touches on the theme of

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<sup>107</sup> Geling Yan, *White Snake and Other Stories*, trans. Lawrence A. Walker (San Francisco: Aunte Lute Books,

the erotic female same-sex relationship with the pertinent target of the body. Set mostly during the Cultural Revolution, when the social order was turned upside down, the novella implies a demanding re-thinking of history through the heroine's self-reflection on gender awakening. The story tells about two young females who develop a homoerotic relation during the Cultural Revolution. Sun Likun, a famous dancer in her thirties who has won international prizes, is denounced as a decadent bourgeois element, a suspected Soviet-trained spy, a seductress and a counter-revolutionary snake-in-the-grass, and is officially placed under investigative detention. Xu Qunshan, a young female whose parents are in charge of the nation's top-research defense project, has been fascinated with Sun Likun's beautiful dance and body when she was a teenager, and gets a chance to visit Sun everyday in her detention. She finally becomes Sun's erotic sisterly friend. Xu has been fond of short hair and boy's clothes from childhood. When a stranger addresses her as "Elder Brother" on the train to Beijing, for the first time she feels her body is inherently androgynous – a body neither-male-nor-female, leading to unlimited possibilities. The novella invokes a discussion of two significant aspects of female-female relations. First, it touches a key question of homosexuality, that is, whether it is innate or a lifestyle choice. The story seems to demonstrate that Xu Qunshan has been born with an androgynous body and thereby inherently fascinated with female beauty. Her final choice of heterosexual marriage indicates that, even though homosexual preference might be an innate characteristic, a homosexual relation has to be developed through the censorship of the dominant discourse.

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1999), 36.



Second, the story illustrates the instability and the transformability of female-female relationships. Although Xu has been perplexed about her gender, Sun is definitely heterosexual considering her previous romances with men. In fact, when Xu disguises herself as a man and visits Sun in the detention room, she at first thinks that Xu was just one of the men who is fascinated with her beauty. However, she continues a sisterly same-sex relation with Xu after she realizes that Xu is female. She even gets upset about Xu's final choice of marrying to a man. It seems that an era of social chaos, in which the dominant discourse is divorced from the logic of reason and legality, provides a temporal space for the existence and development of the same-sex relationship, and for a possible transition from being heterosexual to accepting homosexual relationships. In the story, Sun Likun, an extremely beautiful performer with thoroughly heterosexual seductiveness, believes that nature has been twisted during the social chaos. She finally realizes that she is starting to love Shan-shan, the name she calls Xu after Xu shows feminine tenderness.

Clearly different from the representations of female-female relations involving eroticism, such as Wang and Li in *Brothers*, and Sun Likun and Xu Qunshan in *White Snake*, non-erotic sisterly sentiment, closely intertwined with heterosexual romance, focuses on female character formation, the consciousness of virtue and self-esteem, and the dignity of womanhood – the main factors constituting a woman's subjectivity based on the moral criteria approved by the dominant discourse of patriarchy. A female same-sex relationship developed between girl students within the cultural regime of patriarchy and heterosexuality, patriarchal morality constitutes an

enclosure for women who will be considered eligible to have such a relationship, upon which she is conveyed into the whole realm of heterosexual normality. This patriarchal morality is primarily embodied by female chastity. Highlighting the contrast between the virginity of girl students and the promiscuity of prostitutes with complexity of problematic morality, ethnicity, and gender in the unusual historical moment of the Nanjing Massacre in 1937, Yan Geling's *Jinling Shisan Chai* 金陵十三钗 (*The Flowers of War*)<sup>108</sup> exemplifies the moral criterion for being a selective sisterly figure. The sentimental trifles among the girl students are identified as sisterly friendship, while the thirteen prostitutes, though they might bond even more closely than the girl students, are not eligible for such a same-sex relationship – a developmental stage exclusively for educated young females before they are married, featuring purity, innocence and unfetteredness. The narrative is full of the disgust of the girl students at having to hide from the Japanese troops together with a group of prostitutes in a Catholic Church. Their distaste develops as far as becoming an uncontrolled physical fight, until the ending scene in which the prostitutes disguise themselves as the thirteen girl students and bravely sacrifice their own chances to escape from Japanese Army in order to preserve the virginity of the girl students. The writer represents the impassable gap fixed by patriarchal morality through topographic imagery: the girl students hide in the lofty attic while the prostitutes have to conceal themselves in the basement. This invisible barrier can only be dissolved in this unusual historical catastrophe, when the real horror is not facing the threat of being raped, but lies in the fact that women, noble or lewd, become

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<sup>108</sup> The story was originally a novella but developed into a novel by the author in 2011. Most of the plots involving sisterly sentiment discussed here are based on the longer version.

“equal” in the eyes of their rapists; the female body, virginal or promiscuous, encounters the same treatment, which breaks the walls that enclose patriarchal morality and brings women together into an “equality” in terms of the vulnerable female body. The cruel ending scene shows the reader that the prostitutes, who have been stigmatized as being completely wicked according to patriarchal morality, in fact might and do have sublime virtues in many ways. In light of this, the absolute moral hierarchy based on the patriarchal discourse has been undermined and a sense that women should be liberated from the confinement of the patriarchal hierarchy and treated as individuals is initiated, on the condition of which women’s collectivity has become possible.

In addition to the primary moral criterion, the selection of the sisterly figure is also guided by complex considerations of a series of factors that construct patriarchal discourse, such as family background, reputation and even good looks. In *The Flowers of War*, the sisterly sentiment between Shujuan and Xiaoyu runs through more than half of the narrative. Yan Geling describes their relationship as spiritually masochistic and sadistic. Xiaoyu, being pretty, well-educated, and born into an affluent family, is apt to hurt those who are vulnerable to receiving her friendship. Shujuan is one of these girls. Good-looking and excellent at her studies, Shujuan is envious of Xiaoyu’s outdoing her. The sisterly same-sex model, therefore, in certain extremes, lies in Xiaoyu’s promising a future in terms of the qualities identified with social discourse. In the story, Shujuan and Xiaoyu talk about the looks of the prostitutes in whispers and peep into the basement through air holes when the prostitutes are playing Mahjong. Their sisterly sentiment quickly develops into a deep sincerity, so that Xiaoyu promises to ask for Shujuan to

leave with her when her father comes to rescue her from Nanjing. Yet Shujuan is replaced by another girl, Anna, who finally leaves the Church with Xiaoyu simply because Shujuan has once offended Xiaoyu and is not willing to admit her “mistake.”

Here comes a question: if the sisterly relationship is a stage of female development, is the population of uneducated women really excluded from it? Or does it have a different appearance among uneducated women? Another of Yan Geling's stories that centers on the changes and sufferings of personal lives caused by war provides a representation of sisterly friendship between uneducated women and brings such relationships into the complexity of maternity. Most Chinese cultural productions that are set during the Second Sino-Japanese War are either eulogies of the revolutionary women who braved rains of bullets, or they are descriptions of the exposure to the cruelty of the War, with women portrayed as vulnerable victims. In contrast, the story *Little Aunt Crane* 小姨多鹤 begins in 1945 after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when the Japanese occupation of Manchuria had collapsed. With the Japanese people's desperate wail of “The Chinese are coming!” the same as the desolate cry of “The Japanese are coming!” all over China not long before, the novel sets a reversal tone by focusing on the invisible suffering of Japanese women caused by war that has been usually de-selected and neglected. In the story, in September 1945, 16-year-old Tatsuru has lost her mother and siblings on her trek with thousands of Japanese refugees to a Japanese refuge, where they believe they can take a ship back to Japan. Most of the refugees are women and their children. After suffering life-threatening conditions of starvation, being raped, captured and even shot, mothers begin to

kill their babies. The prologue represents this kind of horrible catastrophe caused by war. Even though these women have lived in one of Japan's overseas colonies, being mothers, wives and daughters, they have been bearers of Japan's policy of holy mothers during the war. This maternal factor is intentionally emphasized in the prologue of *Little Aunt Crane* by the fact that most women on the journey have had more than two children, and some women are still pregnant. From the early stages of militarization, the Japanese government had realized that the cooperation of women was indispensable, and a strategy of total mobilization was implemented to incorporate women. Women's role in the war was strictly limited to being on the "home front" as mothers and laborers. Even in the final stages of the war, when the Japanese military was undermanned, Japan didn't consider using female soldiers. Women were not supposed to die in battle for the nation. In other words, the total mobilization system didn't transcend the boundary of the gender differential. As Ueno pointed out, "It probably comes as some surprise that faced with total mobilization Japan, to the very end, did not demolish the system of gender segregation and, moreover, there did not arise from women themselves a demand for integration."<sup>109</sup> In fact, most ordinary women on the 'home front' were not aware of playing the role of supporters at home and in the rear. According to Ueno, "Among memories reconstructed as the recalled past (the past reconstructed in the present), there are few examples of women who have an awareness of themselves as perpetrators. Even the personal accounts of returnees from Manchuria focus on their own hardships, with little awareness of themselves as invaders protected by military

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<sup>109</sup> Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, trans. Beverley Yamamoto (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 19.

strength.”<sup>110</sup> Women, as mothers, wives, and laborers, moved to Manchuria without any consciousness of aggression and colonization at all. They were productive mothers, playing the role of reproducers to produce soldiers and laborers. Although the women themselves did not realize the Japanese aggression before they went to Manchuria, they were identified as invaders in the eyes of the Chinese people.

Compared to most narrative stereotypes, which either revolve around the life of the male protagonist or center on a heroine’s sentimentality in her lifelong trek, the storyline of *Little Aunt Crane* follows the emotion and lives of two women, Zhu Xiaohuan and Tatsuru, while the male protagonist, Zhang Jian, is greatly weakened to a supporting role. It seemed that the Zhang’s family is supported by Zhang Jian’s work and income, but in fact the family is primarily sustained by the twisted relationship of the two women –Tatsuru and Zhu Xiaohuan’s acceptance of each other. The leading female protagonist, Tatsuru, existed only by hiding her identity – her identity as a Japanese, a wife and a mother. It is Xiaohuan’s acceptance of Tatsuru that makes her existence possible, so that the Zhang family is formed and survives through political changes and social chaos. Xiaohuan and Tatsuru, the wife and the concubine, form an unlikely sisterly friendship. In literary representations, it is not rare that wives and concubines have fairly good relationships, in particular in those classical stories set in the imperial palace or in a wealthy family. The sisterly relationship between Xiaohuan and Tatsuru in *Little Aunt Crane* differs from the stories involving female sentimentality under the strict confinement of patriarchal regime,

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

which either center on the jealousy between women who fall in love with the same man and their emotional entanglement, or focus on how the married women living under one roof help each other for survival, for example, the mutual help of sisters-in-law in Wang Anyi's *Tian Xiang*. Xiaohuan and Tatsuru's relationship shows a transformation from the inescapable hostility between wife and concubine, to sisterly sentiment relying on each other to go through the hard times. A eulogy of women's resilience, *Little Aunt Crane* portrays a particular bond between women, that is, a relationship of sisterly sentiment caused by and closely woven in with a strong-minded maternity that derived from a thorough internalization of patriarchy.

The sisterly relationship between Tatsuru and Xiaohuan is largely on account of motherhood. Starting from the tragedy described in the prologue, our heroine Tatsuru is finally captured by a local informal Chinese military group and sold to the Zhang family for the price of seven silver dollars. Tatsuru is bought by the Zhang family in order to have children. Throughout the narrative, there are several times when Tatsuru leaves the Zhang family, either by fleeing or by being abandoned. It is maternity that brings her back to the family. She endures terrible sufferings on her trek when Zhang Jian intends to abandon her at a historical site along the Yangtze River, a place a little far from home and unfamiliar to Tatsuru, who has never left the building they have lived in. To Tatsuru, maternity has special significance, that is, to produce true blood relatives. Her father and elder brother have died in battle, and she has lost her mother, younger sister and younger brother on their flight to the Japanese refuge. She has become an orphan in a moment. Her strong willingness to produce blood relatives makes Tatsuru endure the

reality of being sold to a Chinese family for producing children. There is no love at all between Tatsuru and Zhang Jian at the beginning. There is a paragraph showing Tatsuru's mental pain when she gives birth to her twins, alone on the slope of a mountain: "She was not very clear herself what she was calling out. At that moment she hated everybody, and most of all the Chinese man who had somehow impregnated her. Duohe did not like this man, and he did not like her. She was not after this man's affection, survival was all she wanted. It had been pretty much the same for her mother and grandmother. Their true family had been the people they gave birth to themselves, or who had given birth to them; all those birth canals were the secret passages by which family feeling was passed on."<sup>111</sup> To Tatsuru, man is not for love but for survival. She has learned this from her mother and grandmother. Tatsuru thinks of suicide when Zhang Jian abandons her, when her clandestine affair with Zhang Jian is found out by Xiaohuan, and when she feels she has lost Zhang Jian's love. It is the belief that her children need her that finally makes her give up the idea of suicide.

On the other hand, the Zhang family buys Tatsuru to carry on the family line because the daughter-in-law, Zhang Jian's wife, Zhu Xiaohuan, cannot conceive. Such behavior becomes quite understandable for people living in rural areas, even today, because it reflects a deep-rooted ideology in Chinese tradition that filial piety is a key virtue for Chinese people and that having no offspring is considered the most unfilial situation. In fact, Xiaohuan has gotten pregnant by the second month of her marriage. During her seventh month pregnancy, she came across four

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<sup>111</sup> Geling Yan, *Little Aunt Crane*, trans. Esther Tyldesley (London: Harvill Secker, 2015), 98.



Japanese soldiers and she climbed onto an ox to flee from the Japanese soldiers. She fell off the ox and later went into premature labor, after which she would not be able to have children. A direct victim of Japanese colonization, she accepts the idea of buying a Japanese woman to have children with her husband, so that the family line can be carried on, and she brings up the children as her own. In other words, having children is the reason that Xiaohuan accepts Tatsuru as a family member, a woman who not only has children with her husband, but also is from the nation that she deeply hates.

It is therefore maternity that transcends the significance of war, nation, race and gender, and finally brings Tatsuru and Xiaohuan together as sisters. It seems that the writer intended to indicate that maternity makes women in the plural possible—a way to re-define women's self-identification according to an attribute inherent and exclusive to women, but also a quality strictly confined within the powerful regime of the patriarchal system. Ironically, it reduced the issue of the gender differential back into one of physiological inequality. The final bonding of Tatsuru and Xiaohuan seems to imply that, ultimately, it is maternity, as a physiological distinction for women, that confines women within the domestic structure and thereby creates various social conditions of gender inequality; it is, paradoxically, maternity, upon which women can re-define themselves, not as the Other of man, but as a gender category capable of producing a true family – a natural family rather than a socially constructed one –formed and passed on through the birth canals. Starting from this natural family, women are able to bond together to create same-sex relationships that transcend the categories that are socially constructed under the

cultural control of the patriarchy, such as nation, race, and gender.

The next question is, is maternity really natural? Is maternity equivalent to the physiological womb? If yes, Xiaohuan wouldn't feel that a child (a son) was so essential for her family; she wouldn't have lost her maternity when her womb was damaged in premature delivery; Tatsuru wouldn't have been sold to the Zhang family to have children; she wouldn't have learned from her mother and grandmother that women could produce their own natural family through the secret canals for survival. Therefore, derived from the ability to have children as an inherent merit of woman, maternity is created and socially constructed by the whole cultural regime of the patriarchy. Hidden behind women's inherent abilities to have children and provide caregiving, the patriarchal system produces the connection between women and domestic responsibilities, such as having children to carry on the family line, producing soldiers to fight for the nation in battles, and working as productive laborers on the home front to support war. Through women's internalizing this system, it further naturalizes such connections as woman's inherent merit, together with the ability to reproduce. This story demonstrates that maternity is socially constructed and politically engendered. The thorough internalization of the domestic responsibilities imposed on women makes Xiaohuan feel guilty and she takes the situation of using another woman to have children with Zhang Jian for granted. For Tatsuru, on the other hand, maternity is both women's responsibility for the nation during the war and a way for personal survival after the war.

As with many of the heroines in Yan Geling's works, who preserve their natural beauty by

not getting a modern education, we see the appearance of female sentimentality between uneducated women in *Little Aunt Crane*. In a sense, the story raises the question of the origin of women's resilience as a problematic virtue. Were women simply born with such a characteristic? Or was it a quality gained from the modern education system, which emphasized self-identification and patriotism at the time of nation salvation, so that the young revolutionaries would be very brave and determined to fight for the nation? But how can we explain that the uneducated women show the same characteristic of resilience when they face tough situations, as do, Tatsuru and Xiaohuan? Yan's portrayal of uneducated women shows that women were not born with a characteristic of resilience; rather, they were born and assimilated into the whole system of a cultural regime of patriarchy through internalization, in complicity with heterosexual marriage. In *Little Aunt Crane*, as the old maid of the Zhu family, Xiaohuan has been so indulged that no one can do a thing with her; however, after she marries Zhang Jian and loses her fertility in the misfortune of the premature birth, she finally accepts the idea of buying a woman in order to have children with Zhang Jian. The 16-year-old Tatsuru survives through all the life-threatening conditions on her way to the Japanese refuge and finally is sold to the Zhang family to have children with a man she had never met before. She makes her life from what she has learned from her mother and her grandmother who believed they were responsible for producing soldiers for the nation during the war. The alliance of the two women as sisters is a reflection of as well as a solution to how women survived the manipulation of patriarchal mechanics that were built up with heterosexual marriage as the backbone.

The sentence on the title page of *Little Aunt Crane*, “To the mothers, wives and daughters who suffer from war” indicates that this is a book particularly for women, and especially for women taking on domestic roles. The story is intended to bridge a real and detailed connection between war and women – the unbelievable suffering that war caused, in complicity with traditional womanhood. While concern is normally given to the Chinese women as the vulnerable group in the nation that was invaded, the author intended to focus on the Japanese women, a group inclined to be neglected, and de-selected. The problematic war responsibility of Japanese women lay in the fact that they were a part of Japanese Imperialism yet they were not allowed to die for the nation in battle; they played the roles of wives and mothers on the “home front.” The story examines the social and political construction of maternity under a specific condition – the calamity of war – and investigates how maternity finally transcends the power regime – the miserable oppression of women – created by the larger categories of war, nation and gender, and allies women together as sisters, when they find a way to survive the patriarchal oppressions. We found from the narrative that Xiaohuan showed real sympathy when she learned of Tatsuru’s horrible experience during her escape to the Japanese refuge. It is the impasse of the human race that made Xiaohuan finally treat Tatsuru as a real family member. I don’t mean that maternity removes the deep hatred of a nation that initiated a war of aggression, but I do think the story intended to demonstrate that the impasse of human race caused by war and the companionship to support one another in everyday life, especially for people going through hard times, can soothe the scars of war. More importantly, the plurality of women is possible, and it

might be a way out of women's oppression within the patriarchal framework.

### **Hong Ying: An Internationalized Voice of Women's Writing**

Hong Ying is one of the best-known Chinese women writers internationally. She was born in Chongqing in 1962, a place and a time in which people were raised to experience the cruelty of the Cultural Revolution as innocent witnesses. This life experience has had a direct influence on her writings in terms of theme, plot and setting. As the critic Chen Xiaoming stated in the prologue of a collection of her short stories, *Lajiao Shi de Kouhong* 辣椒式的口红 (*A Lipstick Called Red Pepper*), "Hong Ying foregrounded the extremeness of female experiences."<sup>112</sup> At eighteen, she started writing poems and short stories as she moved around China for about ten years, and she finally moved to London in 1991 as a writer. Her life experiences – travel, study, and marriage – invest her writings with transcultural and transnational perspectives and help her explore her personal voice as a writer. Some of her writings focus on politically or sexually sensitive subjects, such as Tian'anman Square in 1989 and homosexuality, giving her an international fame by winning awards in Europe and Taiwan. She was not widely recognized in mainland China until her most well-known (semi-)autobiography *Daughter of the River* 饥饿的女儿 was published in 1999,<sup>113</sup> in which she recounted her hunger and poverty in the form of a memoir and at the same time mirrored the larger social condition of the collective suffering of

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<sup>112</sup> Xiaoming Chen, "Nǚxing Bairimeng Yu Lishi Yuyan: Hong Ying De Xiaoshuo Xushi" 女性白日梦与历史寓言——虹影的小说叙事 (Female Daydream and Historical Allegory: The Narrative of Hong Ying's Novels) in *Lajiao Shi De Kouhong* (Sichuan Wenyi Chubanshe, 1999), 5. I'm using my own translation of Chen's article.

<sup>113</sup> The novel was first published in Taiwan in 1997.

the subaltern in socialist China. As Xu Jian proposed, the novel is not only a memoir of personal experiences, but also a representation of underclass suffering. She “opens up an inner space from which she writes her self into being. This inner space is coextensive with the outer space of history and culture. The self Hong Ying eventually invents is therefore a cultural formation located in history and correlative of a collective memory.”<sup>114</sup> *Daughter of the River* won her a reputation in colleges and literary communities as a promising woman writer belonging to the transitional generation of post-socialist writing in the new era represented by Chen Ran, Lin Bai and Chen Danyan. Hong Ying brought her writings into the community of elite literature with a distinctive vision of transculturalism at the turn of the twenty-first century, and further invested modern Chinese literature with a quality stepping towards the internationalism of women’s writing. By embedding “the self” as a collective member of the subaltern in the settings of politically sensitive periods in history, Hong Ying is recognized as “a significant transcultural writer who expresses women’s late twentieth-century yearnings towards western modernity, female autonomy and sexual liberation, introducing previously tabooed themes that have become increasingly dominant within Chinese women’s literature.”<sup>115</sup>

Different from the narration of her best-known work *Daughter of the River*, which is clear and straightforward, the writing style of many of Hong Ying’s short stories feature obscurity, ambiguity and mystery, sometimes reminding us of another Chinese contemporary woman

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<sup>114</sup> Jian Xu, “Subjectivity and Class Consciousness in Hong Ying’s Autobiographical Novel *The Hungry Daughter*” in *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17:56, 2008, 530.

<sup>115</sup> Kay Scaffer and Xianlin Song, *Women Writers in Postsocialist China* (Routledge, 2014), 19.

writer, Can Xue, whose writing has always indulged in an extreme of imagination. In many of Hong Ying's short stories, a subjective narrator's voice is embedded into the main character's stream of consciousness, which moves the narrative between imagination and reality – creating the feeling that every time we attempt to figure out the enigma, the narrative twists and suddenly turns back to reality. Engendering an ambiguity that slips between female same-sex sentimentality and heterosexual marriage, the short stories collected in *A Lipstick Called Red Pepper* published in 1999 featured such a writing style. Hong Ying's writings have never been deficient in bravery to touch upon sensitive themes and be straightforward in disclosing the unfair policies and darkness in socialist modernity. For example, in *Daughter of the River*, she wrote: "We were a family of laborers, and in a nation where the working class were supposedly the masters we somehow never shared in the 'power.'"<sup>116</sup> However, the stories in *A Lipstick Called Red Pepper* regarding same-sex relations do not seem to narrate directly a stance that represents same-sex sentimentality through either psychological intimacy or physical closeness. On the contrary, an extremely obscure implication has been created and lurks in the shadows of heterosexual relations, creating a suspicion that the intention is to render the fact that it is hard for female same-sex relationships to survive through the dominant discourse of heterosexuality.

Her short stories often begin with a plain narration about the female protagonist, without any indication of telling a same-sex story, while, as the plots unfold, we finally find there's an obscure intimacy between the female characters, which implies the author's original intention of

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<sup>116</sup> Ying Hong, *Daughter of the River*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 31-32.

writing a story of female same-sex sentimentality. In *The Saddled Deer* 带鞍的鹿, after a long description of “I” waking up from a strange dream and getting dressed, the female protagonist, Yangsui, turned out to be a close friend of I, and it seems that their friendship ends up with I’s leaving for marriage. The narrator, I, goes back home to her native town after her husband dies and she finds a letter on the floor that is stated to have been written by Yangsui a year ago. As Yangsui’s close friend, I decides to visit Yangsui’s house and is told by her husband that Yangsui has died a year before. He explains that she was sent to a mental hospital one year earlier, as she was suffering from depression. Then she ran out of the hospital to swim in a river and drowned. The story is in fact a personal inquiry about Yangsui’s death. “I” feels it is unbelievable and goes to the police station to request a detailed record of the coroner’s report, but it seems to have been a very common case according to both the brief record of the case and the policeman’s review. “I” however feels it was too hasty a conclusion for a woman’s death like this. She finally ascribes Yangsui’s death to men. It is not until this moment that we finally realize the story has been invested with a perspective of gender relations and implies an intimate sentimentality between Yangsui and I.

There are obscure implications between the lines when we go back to examine the text. Apparently, both of the characters were married. The narrator recalls that she once had “uncommon friendly sentiments with Yangsui.”<sup>117</sup> They came to a mutual understanding that

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<sup>117</sup> Ying Hong, *Lajiao Shi de Kouhong* (Sichuan Wenyi Chubanshe, 1999), 23. Due to the difference between the English version and the original text in Chinese, which might be caused by the paraphrasing process in translation, some plots and narrations are lost in the English version. Here I referred to the original text by using my own translation.



neither of them would attend the other one's wedding so that way neither of them would meet her enemy,<sup>118</sup> which differentiates their sentiment from general friendship among young females. When the narrator told Yang she was about to leave for marriage, Yang told the narrator that she shouldn't get married. Yang believed that a woman who belonged to a man didn't have a house but had only her spirit,<sup>119</sup> indicating a strong consciousness of woman's subjectivity and a negative attitude towards heterosexual marriage. All these lines obliquely suggest a sisterly same-sex sentiment between Yangsui and "I," a same-sex emotion that is feminine, deep and intimate, but also is interrupted by men and their unhappy marriages. With the narrator's conclusion that her misfortunes over the years are connected with the break-up of her friendship with Yangsui, the story still does not clearly point out that Yangsui is homosexual and that her unhappy marriage and death are connected to her homosexual preference. The narrative reveals that Yangsui appreciated the narrator's beauty and felt upset about the heterosexual marriages of both of them; yet it stops at the door of a clarification of the same-sex relationship between the two women, who have entered their unhappy marriages one after the other. Such obscurity produces a notion that they have had no choice, but have been drawn into the institutional mechanism of heterosexual marriage at a widely recognized age of maturation. Even though there is a widespread belief that women should have no problem keeping their same-sex friendships after marriage, the form of the heterosexual family does change women practically due to the switch of life priorities, maternity, and even values. There is neither a space nor an

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<sup>118</sup> Ying Hong, *A Lipstick Called Red Pepper*, trans. Herbert Batt (Bochum: Projekt-Verl., 1999), 85.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 79.

existing form in which to even think about the possible continuity of female intimate same-sex sentimentality along with heterosexual marriage. In other words, it is heterosexual marriage that makes women finally become women – the conventional womanhood within the cultural regime of masculinity. On the other hand, given the lines regarding the same-sex relationship between Yangsui and “I,” it may be inferred that their sentimental intimacy has gone beyond the general same-sex friendship that often goes through a smooth transition from inseparable companions sharing values and secrets through psychological projection before marriage, to close friends who have less time to get together after marriage but still support each other through hard times when they need help. Yangsui and “I” appear more likely to be trapped in a female imaginary slipping from non-erotic sisterly sentiment to the edge of female homosexuality that has been vaguely defined by the monolithic discourse of masculinity.

History has always been a significant element in Hong Ying’s stories. She writes history in a unique literary way. The female protagonist in *The Research of Yu Hong in Recent Years* 近年余虹研究, an old woman who was an editor in a publishing house in the Republican era, is not only a subjective bearer of historical agency, but also a resilient carrier of the history of the Republican era; moreover, she bears an enigma of history. The story features a strong atmosphere of enigma. The answer is gradually revealed as the narrative unfolds to the end, a typical writing style of Hong Ying’s. Specifically, the story touches upon a particular female same-sex relationship, a political sisterhood, and invests it with a feminine embodiment. It imagines the twilight years of the lonely old woman and traces her female same-sex relationship

that developed in the Republican era, and has existed as a lifelong trauma. The words of the young girl who has believed that Yu Hong is her grandmother clearly reveal a same-sex sentiment between the old woman and the mysterious female writer, Yu Hong: “From her diary I found out that you and she were once more than ordinary friends... You didn’t keep in touch after that? What a pity! Maybe as a wife and a mother she had to cut herself off from this experience. That’s really sad! ... It was you. You gave her all those things that men weren’t able to. In the years that you knew each other.”<sup>120</sup> From the narrative and the footnotes we further learn that the old woman might have been Chen Wenren, the editor who was in charge of Yu Hong’s articles at Violet Press. They developed a same-sex friendship in editing and publishing Yu’s articles. In a series of political movements after the birth of the New China that was led by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, including the Cultural Revolution, Chen suffered a lot to protect Yu Hong. She was arrested and unjustly imprisoned over a thirty-year period from the 1950s to the 1970s. The narrative tends to suggest that their relationship ended up with Yu’s sudden departure for marriage in 1945, a particular political moment when the surrender of Japan brought World War II to a close while at the same time a new round of civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang kept China on the battle field for another four years. The narrative also hints that Yu’s leaving was the most miserable experience for the old woman, and given the bleak situation in her late years, it’s reasonable to believe that the old woman didn’t ever get married. All these implications help to interpret the meaning of “more

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 64.

than ordinary friends” – they developed a same-sex relationship that survived in a special space of vagueness between general female friendship and female homosexuality. It is different from general friendship in that this special same-sex relationship often ends up with the interruption of heterosexual marriage, which is an extremely painful separation for the two women, raising a suspicion of their sexual preference and consequently further questioning if they are in fact a homosexual couple who have to give up their relationship in the overwhelming domination of heterosexual discourse; on the other hand, the obscurity lies in that there’s no evidence, such as clear description of sexual preference and physical intimacy, to confirm a homosexual desire between the two. The story represents a continuity of the literary representations of female same-sex sentimental intimacy in the 1920s and 1930s that place an emphasis on its role in women’s self-identification and the building up of subjectivity to become New Woman. The only distinguishing difference from those images in the May 4<sup>th</sup> period is an urgent atmosphere of political tension. If the young females involved in sisterly sentimental intimacy in the Republican era enjoyed a fairly leisurely time before the outbreak of war while they were looking for the self to build up subjectivity through psychological projection, the relationship between Yu Hong and Chen Wenren, with no indication when it started, has gone all the way through the political harshness of wartime in the 1940s, the political movements in the 1950s, and the Cultural Revolution, even though their relationship practically ended in 1945. The mysterious writer Yu Hong and the old woman have been neither activists nor leftists in the Chinese revolution, playing a role in the marriage of literature and politics, nor have they personally taken part in the

revolution; on the contrary, they have been adherents of the slogan of pure literature and therefore politically identified as right deviationists in the 1950s and the 1960s. From the narrative we know that Yu Hong was one of the well-known women writers in the constellation of literary community in the Republican era, together with the other big names, such as Lu Yin, Ding Ling and Eileen Chang, while her writings focused on modern women's freedom in their pursuit of love, and for a long time, they were categorized as pornography. Because of this, Yu was considered politically incorrect, which might have caused serious consequences in the political movements in the 1950s, let alone in the Cultural Revolution. It's reasonable to believe that, as a way to support and protect Yu, Chen made many efforts to publish Yu's articles. This was perhaps due to their common values and aspirations, which, however, were opposed to the grand narrative of nation building through a marriage of literature and politics. The relationship between Yu Hong and Chen Wenren provides an example of a female same-sex relationship in the age of Chinese revolution, which is the opposite of the political sisterhood that we normally imagine. We tend to believe that women lost their femininity entirely from the inside out at the time – cutting their hair short, dressing in military uniforms, walking out to work with men as comrades, and seeking political progress rather than romantic love. As women's subjectivity had given way to revolutionary masculinity, same-sex sentimentality would go through a transition from psychological intimacy that helped to build up the self, to a political sisterhood more careless with personal privacy but wholeheartedly dedicated to the grand narrative of revolution. The textual representation of the female same-sex relationship between the two women in this

story, however, demonstrates that female same-sex sentimental intimacy was neither completely absent in the era of the Chinese revolution, nor necessarily took the form of a political sisterhood that wrapped itself totally in revolution. It still played a significant role in female self-development, but was deselected for political reasons, given the demands of total mobilization to incorporate women for the urgency of nation salvation.

*Pigeon Square* 鸽子广场 is a short story invested with a complex personal experience, a mother-daughter relationship, history, and the difficulties of life overseas. As for its significance regarding the female same-sex relationship, first, it introduces the element of transnationalism. Helen, a young Chinese woman, goes to London with her boyfriend, Shen Yuan, to study. They eventually break up due to the tough conditions of living and studying abroad. Helen meets a woman named Vivian on campus and they quickly became good friends, as Helen leaves Shen's cramped room and moved to Vivian's apartment as her roommate. As an American-born Chinese, Vivian embodies a transnational perspective of the values and attitudes towards life and interpersonal relations. Enjoying the freedom to develop intimate relations with both men and women, she might be considered to be bisexual. However, compared to the fixed identity that the term "bisexuality" renders, her connections with intimate friends seem to be more flexible. Being originally conservative and fixed on heterosexuality, Helen is greatly influenced by Vivian's manner of living, in particular, in the aspect of gender awakening. Set in a new context of globalization and transnationalism, woman once again goes through hard times and develops subjective agency through the company of a woman rather than a man. Secondly, the story once

again demonstrates that female same-sex sentiment is produced by the whole mechanism of heterosexuality. In literary representations, it's not rare that female same-sex relations develop between roommates. Due to the fact that social institutions and censorships are founded through the domination of heterosexual discourse, cohabitation of opposite sexes strongly implies sexual relations, and young females tend to look for same-sex roommates to keep the patriarchal virtue that they have internalized. In the story, after Helen can no longer tolerate living with her boyfriend, she moves out and tries to find a female roommate. Ironically, the story illustrates that such a social conception constructed according to the binary framework of gender category based on the manipulation of heterosexual mechanics, is no longer valid by portraying her new roommate, Vivian, is bisexual. In other words, the patriarchal value has been greatly challenged, if not collapsed, in the co-existence of all the actual variables of heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality.

More importantly, *Pigeon Square* also discusses a special situation in which a female same-sex relationship can be awakened within an already existing strong consciousness of heterosexuality. The female protagonist in the story is trapped in a romantic relationship with her boyfriend, Shen Yuan, who was already married when they fell in love at the college where they teach arts and literature courses together. The first indication that Helen's relationship with Vivian may be sexual is when Shen's wife indicates over the phone that their relation is "abnormal." Shen Yuan's words, "I don't believe you're homosexual"<sup>121</sup> seem to be conclusive

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 118.

judgment. Helen has not realized that her relationship with Vivian has been anything that goes beyond a sisterly friendship between young females, until one day, after a shower Vivian uses a towel to wipe her naked body in front of Helen, who finds it arousing. Their physical intimacy later on further confirms Vivian's bisexual orientation and Helen's final acceptance of homosexuality. The ending of the story, however, in which Helen becomes very depressed by Shen Yuan's fake suicide and Vivian's sharp question of whether she had sex with Shen Yuan that night, seems to indicate Vivian wouldn't be Helen's final choice as a lifelong partner. It's more likely that Vivian has appeared in Helen's life as a sisterly friend to help her pass through a difficult life episode, when she has broken up with her boyfriend in a foreign place where she has neither friends nor relations. At the same time, Vivian's bisexual orientation recasts Helen's gender awakening, which demonstrated that sexual orientation is socially constructed; therefore, it is possible for it to be re-constructed within the existing fixed categorization of sexuality, and it should have such freedom of social reconstruction. In this way, the story has de-constructed the gender categories of heterosexuality.



## CHAPTER 4

### Post-modern Romance and Contemporary Popular Culture

#### Post-Jin Yong and Qiong Yao

In 1998, Qiong Yao's new novel and its TV adaptation *Huan Zhu Gege* 还珠格格 (*My Fair Princess*) swept China and many other countries in Asia and was popular for several years. The story is at both the summit and the end of modernist romance in the sense that it features a twisting storyline of emotional attachment between two protagonists against a backdrop of significant historical periods. Yet it also launched a new trend for the coming era of popular culture by setting the action in the imperial palace in ancient China, in which features of romance and martial arts have been mixed for narrative formation. Thus, the boundary between the genres of romance and martial arts has gradually vanished, making the feature of martial arts indispensable for a panorama of imperial Chinese history and creating a funny sense that almost everyone in ancient China might have been capable of kung fu. Japanese scholar Azuma Hiroki proposed that postmodernity, literally an era that comes after modernity, should be understood not simply as a cultural world constituted of direct offshoots of modernity, but as a massive rupture in which cultural production has been transformed as the fundamental elements of culture have changed within late-capitalist society.<sup>122</sup> He believed that the database-like structure of the Otaku culture, in which consumers focus on characters who are constituted of popular

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<sup>122</sup> Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 7-8.

elements rather than of a narrative created by the originality of an author as such, clearly embodied the essence of postmodernity in postmodern Japan, leading to a transition in the reception of popular culture from narrative consumption to database consumption.<sup>123</sup> The merging of martial arts and romances in contemporary Chinese popular culture also incarnates such features of postmodern production. Romance and martial arts are not mutually exclusive in fiction. The factor of romance has always been involved in martial arts stories, given its everlasting position as the center theme of fiction, for example, in Jin Yong's *Shen Diao Xia Lü* 神雕侠侣 (*The Return of the Condor Heroes*). On the other hand, it's not rare that a protagonist in romance is capable of or is even a master of martial arts. One important factor that distinguishes the two genres and eventually categorizes the text as within the genre of martial arts is the description of fighting styles and martial actions that the work carries. In many of Qiong Yao's love stories, for example, the male protagonist practices martial arts as an essential element of his illustriousness and a pragmatic capability to save his love during some critical moments. The factor of martial arts, therefore, merely exists as a strategy for character formation, giving the male protagonist a chivalrous disposition that helps to create an intensive romantic atmosphere and a patriarchal notion that women are weak and have to be taken care of, under the protection of men. In addition, the figures capable of kung fu in the genre of romance are not characters living in the community of *jianghu*, "a unified, holistic community where

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

mankind is one with the natural world.”<sup>124</sup> (Liu, 110) They are young masters from patrician families, who are well educated, and incredibly talented and who (will) serve in a position within institutional society. Assisting with his skills in martial arts, this prominent man becomes extremely attractive in making a Cinderella story. Qiong Yao has never written another novel since the series of *My Fair Princess* and its TV adaptations, which became extremely popular at the turn of the twenty-first century. She has never officially announced she will quit writing, and her novels are still being remade again and again in television and film. These remade adaptations, however, are no longer competitive with newly composed romance productions, such as *Yun Zhong Ge* 云中歌 (*Song in the Clouds*), for example, one novel of a trilogy of *Love in the Han Dynasty*. It was written by a contemporary romance novelist, Tong Hua, who is known for her popular love stories set in ancient China, which have been adapted into TV series with high ratings. There is a new feature that is emerging from such cultural productions that distinguishes them from the previous romance novels represented by Qiong Yao’s writings. In these newer romances, martial arts has gone beyond its subsidiary position. Let’s examine the textual representations of martial arts features in *Song in the Clouds* as an example of a newly emerging sub-genre, which might be termed postmodern romance.

“Thousands of miles of desert burned as brightly as the noonday sun.  
It glittered golden between the earth and the sky.  
A color long prized by the people instead symbolizes the laughter of death here.

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<sup>124</sup> Petrus Liu, *Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History* (Ithaca, New York: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2011), 110.

The sharp reflection of the white light shines on animal carcasses or human remains.

The White Dragon Bone Desert right outside Lou Lan City is known for its windstorms and dangerous terrain.

Without a familiar guide, almost no one can walk out of this desert alive.

At the crest of a sandy dune, a band of ten or so people was struggling at the edge of near death.

Seven days ago their Lou Lan guide betrayed them, using a sudden desert windstorm to abandon this group of Han travelers.

These people are not weak at martial arts or stamina, but in the face of deadly nature they are as weak as ants.

If they don't find a water source soon, they will forever be here, turning into one of the piles of white bones."<sup>125</sup>

The story of *Song in the Clouds* is set in a boundless sea of sand rather than in a common courtyard in town or a wealthy mansion with the imperial background that we usually expect for romance. It's in fact more like a martial arts story rather than a romance story. The entire narrative, not only the beginning, features a writing style with a light rhythm of short sentences throughout the three-volume-long story and has much in common with the narrative aesthetics of martial arts fiction. The bleak desert produces desperation and mystery, reminding readers of the widespread images in martial arts fiction of fantastic skills that are used in battles between martial arts masters. At the same time, the desert gives characters a marginal identity that might conform to what Petrus Liu has defined as "stateless subjects" in his discussion of martial arts narratives as a manner of nonstatist politics. The novel is named for the heroine Huo Yunge, the daughter of a wolf girl and Huo Qubing, who was a distinguished military general of the Western

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<sup>125</sup> <http://koalasplayground.com/2012/03/05/yun-zhong-ge-chapter-1-green-woven-skirt/>

The novel hasn't had an official English version. The translation is quoted from the website: A Koala's playground, where Koala has translated it into English, together with many Chinese and Korean popular fiction and dramas.

Han dynasty. Yet the story doesn't happen in Huo Qubing's early glory days when he was a talented young general known for his outstanding exploits of defeating the force of northern Xiongnu, an identity within the power regime of a social institution. It starts from an imagination of his mysterious leaving for the margin of the empire, where he died at the early age of twenty-four according to the official history. The daughter of a government official has lost her noble identity and is living freely beyond the border of Han territory. The male protagonist, Meng Jue, is a pure jianghu warrior seeking Emperor Zhao of the Han (汉昭帝), Liu Ling, and Emperor Xuan of the Han (汉宣帝), Liu Xun, to get revenge for his brother's death. He saw his own brother forced to be the substitute victim for Liu Xun, the only survivor in the clan of Empress Wei. Meng Jue finally loses all his family members and is later raised by Meng Jiu, the wealthy master of the Shi Manor's family trading business who is well-known for his medical skill. Meng Jue succeeds as head of his foster father's business and continues to practice his outstanding skill in medicine, which provide him with both an honored identity in the community of jianghu, and the capital to get close enough to the royal clans to get his revenge. In other words, although the imperial court of the Han dynasty is set as the main backdrop of the story, the male leads are all capable of superior skills of martial arts, and the major characters all have or have once experienced life in the community of jianghu, investing the text with a heavier weight of martial arts factors. The text doesn't place emphasis on the portrayal of the world of jianghu – different martial arts schools, battles between martial artists, and miraculous kungfu manuals for which martial arts schools will compete to fight – rather, it centers on the emotional entanglements

between the heroine Yunge and the male leads. The story as a whole is still a romance, but it is a postmodern romance embedded with substantial elements of martial arts. In such productions, the close-knit net of jianghu is broken up into fragments loosely connected by strong emotional attachments between characters. In the TV adaptation of a popular role-playing video game *Xian Jian Qi Xia Zhuan* 仙剑奇侠传 (*The Legend of Sword and Fairy*, 2005), a name that appears to denote a martial arts story, has transitioned its focus from a swordsman in the community of jianghu to emotional entanglements between the male and female leads, making a sophisticated ambiguity of martial arts and romance. Some narrative elements that are supposed to carry significant weight in traditional martial arts fiction, such as the Demon Sect of the Moon and the magic skill of the Reining Swords, have been greatly weakened as relatively isolated accessories that are more functional for plot development than as a construction of the net of jianghu. More importantly, supernatural elements of fantasy have been added to the storyline as important narrative constructions. The heroine, Zhao Ling'er, is actually a half-serpent spirit. In other words, the community of jianghu in traditional martial arts fiction has been broken into a hybrid variation with the intermingling of various factors of martial arts, romance, fantasy, psychic power, mystery, time travellers, rebirth and such, and has gradually become a newly emerging sub-genre that might be defined as post-modern romance. The new genre became extremely popular in the first decade of the twentieth-first century Chinese literature and popular culture, and it has replaced the market for traditional popular culture represented by Jin Yong and Qiong Yao.

Another feature of post-modern romance is the context in which the story happens, not only as a background, but also, in many cases, bringing out character identities that play an important role in the unfolding of the plot. The new genre has moved its focus from significant figures in remarkable historical periods to characters who either are in transitional stages between empires and chaotic states without a unified nation form, or are unknown figures overshadowed by the brilliant glory of those who made notable achievements in history. These minor periods or figures have been dug out as a re-discovery of time periods that were recorded with as little as one sentence in the formal documents of chronicles. History is reconstructed in the form of legitimate fabrication and gets in a fairly tolerant reception due to the unfamiliarity of the period and the original absence in the official dynastic records. In this way, history is re-constructed in the form of fiction within the confines of history, which has become another attractive characteristic for readers. When they find out that the characters or even the stories are not completely fictional, they become interested in looking for the actual historical traces. In other words, postmodern romance weaves in history with fiction. The main characters are in fact historical figures, yet due to the scarcity of information in the official records of history, authors are relatively free to fabricate stories and possibly avoid censure; this stimulates people's interest in figuring out the clues of the little-known history. Postmodern romance also distinguishes itself from the subgenre of "*Xi Shuo*," a dramatized history that appeared on television in the last decade of twentieth century. *Xi Shuo* usually focused on prominent time periods of ancient history or the representative figures of the dynasty – those main leads in historical dramas – but

completely fictionalized their stories with fabrication. Hence there is a clear division between historical dramas and the popular *Xi Shuo* dramas. Postmodern romance fills the position in-between. On one hand, it's quite clear that the stories that revolve around the figures and time periods buried by the brilliance of emperors and empires are completely fabricated and fictional; on the other hand, there are clues of actual facts that happened in history that are vaguely mentioned in the official historical records, and there have been no historical dramas that focused on these ignored parts of history. This feature not only creates a relatively tolerant atmosphere for the fiction, but also captures people's interest in figuring out the hidden time periods in history. The stories revolving around these ignored historical figures or time periods break away from the stereotype of the cultural production centers of history that have played on television and bestsellers in the last decade of twentieth-century China, and that are stepping towards a new direction at a time when producers of historical dramas, after constantly remaking them, can hardly come up with a breakthrough production.

Azuma believed there's a deeper relationship between postmodernity and Japanese Otaku culture, that is, how fiction relates to people's actions and the corresponding value standards that their actions correspond to. Modernity requires consolidation and unity, politically expressed as nation-state, economically as productivity, and culturally as grand narrative, while in postmodernity, the grand narrative is no longer functional for the variety of actions and value standards.<sup>126</sup> At the turn of the twenty-first century, a new trend of postmodern romance that

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<sup>126</sup> Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis:



incorporates the elements of martial arts, fantasy and illusion has gradually replaced the grand narrative of historical dramas based on the official historical texts as source materials. The sub-genre has been quickly rising in popularity since the historical dramas and the remade productions of the traditional romance and martial arts fiction couldn't compete with them any more, indicating the decline of grand narrative. The traditional images were of the brilliant empires represented by the emperors who reached great achievements and the well-known empresses and beauties who embodied the imperial life in ancient China, seen in, for example, the popular historical dramas *Tang Ming Huang* 唐明皇 (*The Emperor Xuanzong of Tang*, 1993), *Wu Ze Tian* 武则天 (*Empress Wu*, 1995), *Kangxi Wangchao* 康熙王朝 (*Kangxi Dynasty*, 2001), *Han Wu Da Di* 汉武大帝 (*The Emperor Han Wu*, 2005). These images have been replaced by TV productions adapted from postmodern romance novels such as *Bu Bu Jing Xin* 步步惊心 (*Startling by Each Step*, 2011) which features time travel, and *Yun Zhong Ge* 云中歌 (*Song in the Clouds*, 2015), which focuses on the imperial figures who came after the brilliance of Emperor Wu in the Han Dynasty. The well-known romantic story of the Emperor Xuanzong of Tang and his Consort Yang is a popular subject for TV adaptations. Their story was first adapted into a TV series in 1993, and it has been considered the classic edition of the images of both the emperor and his beloved consort. His story was remade under the same name in 2013, and most recently, in 2016, but neither of them earned (or expect to earn) as much attention as the old one from the 1990s. The well-known TV series, *Emperor Wu of the Han*, once filled in the blanks of our

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University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 26-29.

knowledge of the great expanded empire in the long reign of Emperor Wu in the Han Dynasty. Viewers could see an elaborate portrayal of the emperor and his reign based on official historical materials regarding the warfare, vast territorial expansion and political and cultural centralization of the era. Now, however, from the cultural productions of postmodern romances like Tong Hua's *Song in the Clouds*, we find out that there was also an important historical period called "The Resurgence during the administrations of Emperors Zhao and Xuan" 昭宣中兴 in the middle of the Western Han Dynasty. TV series about martial arts, once extremely popular in the 1980s and 1990s, have been gradually receding from view as the remade series are often criticized for being unable to go beyond the classic editions and therefore get more negative comments. They have finally given way to the rise of a series of fantasy martial arts fictions, which might be properly categorized into a branch of postmodern romance, for example, *Xian Jian Qi Xia Zhuan* 仙剑奇侠传 (*The Legend of Sword and Fairy*), *Hua Qian Gu* 花千骨 (*The Journey of Flower*, 2015) and such.

In Azuma's discussion of Japanese anime and manga productions, the rise of derivative works is another cultural phenomenon of postmodernity. The distinction between the original and the parody has been weakened and replaced by a world of simulacra in which the original is also created through imitation of previous works.<sup>127</sup> The vigorous market of Japanese manga, anime and games produced through infinite imitation and reproduction explains this well. For Chinese society, cultural productions with backdrops of ancient China reserve an equivalent position in

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 58-63.

popular culture as that of anime in postmodern Japan. In 2011, three TV series, *Gong* 宫 (*Palace*), *Bu Bu Jing Xin* 步步惊心 (*Startling by Each Step*), and *Zhenhuan Zhuan* 甄嬛传 (*The Legend of Zhenhuan*), filled television screens in mainland China, all achieving high ratings and followings, with a large number of online hits. All of them are love stories with backdrops in the imperial palace of the Yongzheng Emperor in the Qing dynasty. *Palace* and *Startling by Each Step* share high similarity in terms of the plots in which a twenty-first century girl travels back through time to the Qing dynasty and meets her favorite historical figure, Yinzhen, who later became Emperor Yongzheng. Both of these shows center on the love story between the two and on the political battles in the imperial palace over Yongzheng's disputed succession to the throne. However, the effect of the three productions was not a rival relationship but mutual promotion for television and online ratings. They all became extremely popular in online viewings, in particular. Again, they embody what we've discussed above, that the element of the time traveller has been added into the narrative to construct a postmodern romance. This contrasts with the 1990s historical drama, *Yongzheng Wangchao* 雍正王朝 (*Yongzheng Dynasty*, 1999), adapted from the biographical novel, *Yongzheng Emperor*, by historical fiction writer Ling Jiefang, better known by his pen name, Eryue He. He started with the well-known historical event of a political battle for the throne and Yongzheng's disputed succession, and further unfolded the story, with the Yongzheng Emperor's strict autocratic acts under his reign, such as literary inquisition and severe punishment for corruption, while the postmodern romances, *Startling by Each Step* and *Palace*, center on the fictional part, the romantic story between

Yongzheng Emperor (the fourth prince in the drama) and the modern girl who travels back into the Qing dynasty. The bloody battle for the position of crown prince has been reenacted with the attractive highlight that the girl in fact knew about the whole historical event and its result quite well, creating the dramatic effect that truth becomes fiction when the fiction is true.

The existence and flourishing of derivative works is owing to a rise of online platforms, such as Jinjiang Literature City and Qidian Chinese Fiction. As the Internet has greatly changed most of everyday life in human society, the birth of such literature websites not only produces a new mode of operation, but also generates a new way of producing as well as consuming. Web writing takes a serial fiction style of publication, but compared to the traditional media of newspapers and magazines, there's more freedom for the both writing and reading online. Most web writers are in fact not full-time writers, but also have other occupations. They are urban, fairly well-educated and very enthusiastic about Chinese literature and creative writing. They write on their own time and post the sections online to serialize the story. The big difference, therefore, is that for the writers, web writing doesn't require a publishing house, and for the readers, the works are available to read anytime, at their convenience. The writers have more freedom in time management and theme preference since they don't bear much economic pressure from depending on writing for a living, and more importantly, they have no need to find an organization, or more pertinently, to meet certain standards of writing quality, to get the work published. On the consumption side reading web fiction has become an outlet to relieve daily stress for young generations. The serial format provokes interest in reading since the readers are

eager to find out about the newly updated plots. It is a more relaxed way of reading, compared to the traditional reading mode in which readers might feel that it is tedious to finish a single thick volume. In addition, the prevalence of mobile devices and relevant applications indeed make web writing even more popular. The web-based communities are in fact fertile soil for postmodern romance. The relatively tolerant policy environment for web writing allows writers to have a broader space for themes, genres, literary expression and creative imagination. It circulates a variety of narrative elements to form a “database” of postmodern romance, so that some popular fiction that contains favorite postmodern elements will stand out from the crowd and get published regularly, and at the same time, be adapted into TV dramas. The gradual stabilization of this database inevitably leads to a copycat writing mode, in which writers tend to pick up those popular narrative elements from the database to facilitate the storyline, so that a flurry of derivative works flood the web communities. In fact, only a few of them finally become bestsellers and TV adaptations. To some extent, many works published online also gain popularity according to the quantity of viewers and followers, and some successful ones that have become well-known to almost everyone still show similarity in many aspects. In postmodern romance, the aura of the originality of the grand narrative has lost ground to a derivative world of simulacra assembled by a variety of narrative elements.

In 2014, a young screenwriter, Yu Zheng, was embroiled in the center of a case of story plot plagiarism. As a successful representative of screenwriters and producers from the young generation, Yu founded his own film and television studio in 2002 after he had worked with

experienced professionals in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In 2010, the TV series, *Meiren Xinji* 美人心计 (*Beauty's Rival in the Palace*), starring Ruby Lin, won him recognition as a capable young gold medal screenwriter. Followed by *Meiren Tianxia* 美人天下 (*Beauty World*, 2011) and *Meiren Wu Lei* 美人无泪 (*Beauty Without Tears*, 2012), this drama also initiated a new type of TV sequential serial, called *Beauty*. Having gained big success with this new type of production, Yu went on with a new serial of *Palace*, which earned him a great reputation through many television awards. This recent serial of *Palace*, called *Gong Suo Lian Cheng* 宫锁连城 (*Palace, The Lost Daughter*), showed a strong similarity to a 1990s TV drama, *Meihua Lao* 梅花烙 (*Plum Blossom Scar*, 1993), which was adapted from the novel of the same name, written by the most famous Chinese romance novelist, Qiong Yao, from Taiwan. Qiong Yao has been claiming that the plots in the first half of Yu's *The Palace, The Lost Daughter* were almost completely based on her work, *Plum Blossom Scar*, and she appealed to Hunan Satellite TV to stop airing it. A lot of TV fans also found the resemblance since *Plum Blossom Scar* was an extremely popular show in the 1990s and has been replayed many times on different TV stations until recently. Qiong Yao finally sued Yu Zheng for his plagiarism in Beijing after she submitted a written request to the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television for immediate suspension of the airing of the TV series, but got no response. The People's Court of Beijing finally announced that Yu Zheng was guilty of plagiarism and he had to pay five million RMB to Qiong Yao, as well as giving a public apology. Although the case has drawn wide discussion, and most TV fans supported Qiong Yao, *The Palace, The Lost Daughter* finished its premier broadcasting,

and it attracted the most public attention at the time the case was ruled. The case damaged Yu's reputation as a rising young screenwriter, and some of his previous works also were suspected of plagiarism. However, the TV dramas and films made by his studio still play a rather considerable part in Chinese contemporary popular culture and postmodern romance. I do not intend to equate postmodern derivative simulacrums to plagiarism, which should be strictly prohibited at any time. The plagiarism case of Yu Zheng once again reveals and sounds the alarm about the problematic issue of copyright of the cultural productions in mainland China. But there must be some reason for the fact that even though it's quite clear that a large part of the work is copied, many people still show a strong interest in watching the drama since it finished its premier broadcasting with a fairly good rating. This illustrates that the aura of originality has faded for the era of postmodernity holding up the slogan of narrative elements, or the fragments of grand narratives. The criterion for judging the quality of a work has transitioned from the authorship and his originality to simulacra constituted of flowing elements from a database. This process of constitution includes assembling, parodying and remixing the originals, and therefore, similarity cannot be avoided in derivative simulacra. The fact is that people just show little seriousness regarding originality, so long as those selected elements are good enough to capture their interest.

To briefly sum up, the newly formed genre of postmodern romance emerging in the first decade of the twenty-first century and flourishing in the markets of publishing and adapted television series in recent years has gradually defeated and further replaced the traditional historical dramas, martial arts fiction, and romances that epitomize the ethos of the grand

narrative of modernity. These cultural productions – fiction, television series and video games – gain popularity through the hybridity of narrative elements and the variety in character formation. Postmodern romance further generates a series of sub-categories in terms of the different highlights of the narrative elements, such as fantasy, fairy and martial arts, time traveling, mystery and rebirth. Different from the modern productions, in which the foreground is the beauty of the heroine and the heroism of the male protagonist, postmodern romance often has multiple leading characters, and all of them are written with depth and nuance, inevitably making same-sex relationships a main storyline surrounded by romantic relations between the opposite sexes as subordinate lines.

### **The Disposition of Sisterly Sentimentality in Post-modern Popular Culture**

Within the wide range of Chinese contemporary popular culture, which mainly consists of bestsellers, TV dramas and entertainments, comedy films and video games, the sentimentality between young females regarding self-identification and the subjectivity, which I've defined as sisterly same-sex sentiment, has been strictly placed under the cultural regime of patriarchy and heterosexuality in complicity with both an ideology and a substantial imposition of state regulation. The connotation in the suggestion of "same-sex" – a possible transition from non-erotic sentiment to homosexual desire, enabled by the process of gender-awakening as the sisterly figure guides her way into a heterosexual marriage – therefore has been completely excluded to reach a thoroughly non-erotic sisterly relation. In other words, an overwhelming heterosexual ideology, assisted by laws, rules and regulations, produces a fairly fixed image of heterosexuality



as the only legitimate form of interpersonal romance that appears in various forms of popular culture. This ideology functions as a mirror reflecting, and more importantly, performing back to, people's everyday lives. At the same time, the imaging of homosexual desire has been utterly cut down in Chinese contemporary popular culture. Non-erotic sisterly same-sex sentiment, which can be consequently simplified as sisterly sentiment, has been limited to a very small space as an integrated force within the whole regime of masculine power.

On the one hand, the theme of same-sex relationships in contemporary popular culture has been inevitably highlighted by the fact that the post-modern romance subgenre features multiple leading characters. In 2010, Yu Zheng's *Beauty's Rival in Palace* for the first time clearly tells a story with multiple leading female characters, two of whom, serving as parallel heroines, are in the beginning sisterly friends who later on became rivals in the imperial palace. The extremely popular TV series in 2011, *The Legend of Zhenhuan*, has much in common with *Beauty's Rival in the Palace* in terms of its main theme depicting the brutal competition between the Empress and the concubines of Qing Emperor Yongzheng; multiple female characters build up a female community in which several young females from official families who entered the Emperor's harem finally fought for survival in the harsh palace. The heroine, Zhenhuan, made her way through all the supports and betrayals of sisterly friends and eventually became the most powerful concubine in the palace. It is consequently quite understandable that the imperial life in ancient China shapes the context in which this image of sisterly sentiment is first created and received in contemporary popular culture. The narrative, with multiple leading characters, for

both male and female protagonists, has been then gradually expanded into the category of the urban drama, taking a more realistic social stance. For example, *Huan Le Song* 欢乐颂 (*Ode to Joy*, 2016) centers on how five women in metropolitan Shanghai, living on the same floor as neighbors, support each other as they go through the troubles and difficulties of life, career and love, and finally became sisterly friends. Staying away from the notion of a possible or suspicious transition to homoeroticism, this feature of post-modern romance has foregrounded the same-sex relationship, focusing on psychological support as one of the main themes of television dramas in contemporary popular culture as it stretches from historical period dramas to urban love stories.

On the other hand, an overwhelming cultural oppression from the system of patriarchy and heterosexuality produces a rather fixed image of sisterly relationship in which a couple of young females who are close friends in the beginning will finally turn to enmity because of falling in love with the same man. *Beauty's Rival in the Palace* (2010) and *The Legend of Miyue* 芈月传 (2015), the companion to *The Legend of Zhenhuan*, are typical stories that give a twisted portrayal of sisterly relationships between two young women who have known each other from childhood and have gone all the way through friendship, support, trust, struggles, betrayal and hostility. In this stereotype of non-erotic sisterly sentiment, one of the two parallel heroines is gloriously endowed with beauty, kindness, wisdom, capability and even luck, while the quasi-heroine – the minor leading female character – who is also outstanding in beauty, wisdom and capability, is full of evil and finally deserves to have a tragic end. The fixity of female

relationships in contemporary popular culture, in fact, at one and the same time seems to propagate women's agency as a powerful social subject while at the same time, it limits it in a closed space of female imaginary within the patriarchal framework under the domination of masculinity. The stereotype also extends its setting background from ancient China to modern times, and there is a slight change in which the stories that look back on the old days decades ago usually stick more to the fixed image that centers on the life trajectory of two young women who get to know each other and become sisterly friends from a very early age. Urban dramas that are set in the present day, however, tend to deal with sisterly relations more flexibly. For example, stories may focus merely on an episode in women's life, in which multiple female characters meet each other accidentally, such as in *Haoxiang Haoxiang Tanlian'ai* 好想好想谈恋爱 (*Eager to Fall in Love*, 2004) and *Ode to Joy*. A recent television series *Liang Ge Nüren De Zhanzheng* 两个女人的战争 (*The War of Two Women*, 2015), tells a story of two young females who were sisterly friends and went to rural areas together as "educated youth" in the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement" in the Cultural Revolution. The two women finally became lifelong enemies because they both fell in love with the male protagonist. An enclosure of a female-female relationship has been created to foreclose any possibility of women's transition beyond the boundary of heterosexuality. More importantly, it helps to strengthen the domination of masculine power by producing images of women who seem to automatically get emotionally attached to men. The two women are very willing and indulging in their romantic relations with men, even going as far as fighting against their best same-sex friend.

In a recent interview regarding New Confucianism and gender issues in contemporary Chinese culture, Dai Jinhua criticized the stereotype of TV dramas that centers on women's miserable fight for love and survival in the imperial palace as being in fact a psychological suggestion of a restoration of polygamy in modern times. She believed that the popularity of the stories revolving around a man with wives and concubines in almost every social class, in particular for female audiences, indicates that a notion of polygamy in the domestic structure remains lurking in social psychology. A ghost of polygamy is ideologically deeply rooted in the image of gender and family, which, more importantly, has been culturally recalled and even revived by the capital-oriented value system in contemporary China. The possession of women has become a demonstration of a man's power exclusively measured by his capital. Capital is historically patriarchal-structured. The monopoly of capital is therefore predetermined to be a process of exclusion for vulnerable groups including women.<sup>128</sup> We are still living in a patriarchal society in which historical progress is actually launching a new turn of women's internalization of domestic roles. Women are very willing to go back to their domestic roles as good wives and mothers. It has even become a criterion for women's privileged lives. It is in such a social context that the melodramas centering on the theme of sisterly friends who sacrifice their longtime friendship to fight for the love of the same man has become a popular entertainment for women. At the same time, this theme further strengthens the social structure of

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<sup>128</sup> Jinhua Dai, "Dang Xia De Xingbie Xiangxiang Zhong, Shenke De Cunzai Zhe 'Duo Qi Zhi' Youling" 戴锦华: 当下的性别想象中, 深刻地存在着“多妻制”幽灵 in *The Paper* 澎湃新闻, Dec. 15 2015. [www.thepaper.cn](http://www.thepaper.cn)

patriarchy in complicity with the monopoly of capital. In this sense, the theme of non-erotic sisterly sentiment has been already deeply embedded into the whole mechanism of patriarchy and heterosexuality through cultural production. It has become a metaphorical reflection of women's psychological state in the social status quo that is impacted by an inveterate ideology standing at the intersection of economy and culture, hiding behind the public appeal of gender equality. The theme therefore doesn't play any function in building up the self and women's subjectivity, but draws women into a rather conventional womanhood embracing filiality, morality and maternity. In the stereotype, even though the heroine seems to possess absolute power over herself, her family, and even the nation under heaven, there is always a hint in the storyline that, in the beginning, the woman would like to follow the traditional principles, but she is finally pushed up onto the seat of power due to a loss of love and a series of chance happenings and coincidences. Dai Jinhua's commentary is a harsh response to the ridiculous remarks recently raised by neo-conservative Confucian scholars represented by Jiang Qing's interview published in *The Paper* titled "Only Confucianism Can Settle Modern Women."<sup>129</sup> In the article, Jiang first defended the idea that polygamy in fact didn't originate from Confucian principles, saying that an old custom for it exists in almost all ancient nations. For a long time in history, Confucianism just tacitly consented to polygamy as the primary form of marriage. It is in the denunciation of Confucianism as the center of traditional values and feudalism in the May 4<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Jiang Qing's Interview, "Zhiyou Rujia Neng Andun Xiandai Nüxing" 只有儒家能安顿现代女性 in *The Paper* 澎湃新闻, August 12, 2015. [www.thepaper.cn](http://www.thepaper.cn)

Movement in 1919 that Chinese intellectuals unfairly blamed polygamy on Confucianism. Jiang further gave a defense for polygamy by claiming that concubines under a system of polygamy were actually protected by the law. A concubine was entitled to a stable life, property inheritance, legal status for her children and the chance to become a wife under certain conditions, which indicated that the relationship between husband and wives under polygamy system is very different from and much better than the current phenomenon existing for many families who are annoyed and destroyed by illegal relationships between husband, wife and lovers. Therefore, polygamy might even be a possible solution for the increasingly high divorce rate in the social status quo. Such remarks of neo-conservative Confucianism apparently led women's studies in a wrong direction and angered many feminist scholars. However, it seems that the idea that women should return to their domestic roles, as truly embodying women's natural attributes as well as their social attributes and therefore are the ultimate value of women's lives, is quite compatible with the state ideology in recent years, given that Confucianism is distinctively Chinese and its emphasis is on a harmonious relationship between the individual and the state. The stability that neo-conservative Confucianism contributes to the state through "guiding" women to feel content with their domestic status so that the whole patriarchal system is further strengthened is the main consideration of state regulation. In this sense, the stereotype of non-erotic sisterly sentiment on television – sisterly friends who enter romantic relationships successively, and go all the way through friendship, support, struggle and betrayal within their romantic relationships with men – will function as a mirror image of psychological guidance to direct a woman to mentally focus

on her marriage and family by dragging her to sit on the sofa in front of the TV every day.

It is consequently quite clear that any possibility of women's self-construction that might go beyond the boundary of patriarchy, and its inseparable fellow heterosexuality, has been given strict supervision and will be filtered out in contemporary Chinese popular culture. Such absolute exclusion is firstly and ideologically attributed to the Chinese traditional conception of morality in support of the modern scientification of sexuality. Owing to a series of open policies since the 1980s to accelerate economic development, China has been propelling thought liberation and cultural communication with the West, and the young generations – the generations of the post-80s and post-90s – seem quite open-minded to the issues of sexual preference and the tendency of homosexual desire, although homosexuality is nonetheless still considered a violation of ethics and a regression of human evolution for Chinese society. In actual fact, it is the acceptance of homosexual desire among the young generations, caused by curiosity about gender minorities, rather than an attitude of equal respect for people engaging in same-sex love, that precisely reveals a strong consciousness of the binary of normality and abnormality. Traditional Chinese values consider same-sex love to be absolutely inappropriate and to be a phenomenon against ethics. But it was not criminalized and was quite widespread. Such a traditional conception regarding the norm of sexuality continues to have a dominant influence on the 1950s and 1960s generations, who have become the leading class and who now control the mainstream values in contemporary Chinese society. Recently, a Chinese adoption center denied receiving an adoption

application from a lesbian couple in the United States.<sup>130</sup> The case caused a buzz on the Internet. Later on, an entry on the website of the China Center for Children's Welfare and Adoption (CCCWA) regarding inter-country adoption explicitly declared that the China adoption center did not look for adoptees for same-sex couples.

### 同性恋者能否在中国收养子女？

中国收养中心不为同性恋者寻找收养对象。从法律上讲，《中华人民共和国婚姻法》只承认异性婚姻组成的家庭，不承认同性恋家庭的合法性，同性恋家庭不受法律的保护。从中国医学上讲，《中国精神病分类和诊断标准》规定同性恋属于性指向障碍，归于心理障碍类的精神疾病。从中国的传统道德和民情风俗上讲，同性恋是违背社会公德的行为，不被社会所认同。根据《收养法》关于收养不得违背社会公德的原则，外国同性恋者不能在华收养子女。<sup>131</sup>

It clearly stated that, in accordance with the Marriage Law of the People's Republic of

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<sup>130</sup> Melissa Castro Wyatt, *The Washington Post*, March 7, 2016. This case, to me, is actually more like a worldwide appeal for the equality of same-sex love and marriage, rather than a specific condemnation of the unfair policy of the Chinese government. It is not a case in which a lesbian couple went with a regular adoption process and was finally denied by Chinese organizations. In fact, a group of abandoned Chinese special-needs children had been offered an opportunity to come to the United States for Christmas to look for a possible adoption by an American family. In this visiting group, Melissa Castro Wyatt met Hu, a 4-year-old boy with a clubfoot, in an indoor therapy pool in Virginia. She wanted to adopt him, but she immediately realized she might not be able to since she was married to a woman. She knew quite well that the Chinese government had very strict adoption policies towards the adopters and that same-sex couples were definitely not eligible for adoption. Later, when Hu was on his way back to China, Melissa, hoping that the Chinese government may grant waivers for special-needs children, texted his host-mom to ask if the Chinese adoption agency would make an exception for a same-sex couple. The response was that they would not be considered. As an independent writing consultant, Mellissa wrote an article titled "I bumped into my fate, and against China's adoption rules," ending by saying that China's rules are very arbitrary and that at this time, it is still not quite clear which countries will accept same-sex couples as adoptive parents. The Chinese media published articles titled "Chinese government denied the adoption by an American same-sex couple of a Chinese kid with special-needs," and dug out policies regarding inter-country adoption on CCCWA's website. On the one hand, it's definitely a gimmicky title to grab attention; on the other hand, those rules and policies, which are issued and insisted on by the Chinese government seem unfair on a worldwide scale; they do cause people's attention and a flurry of discussion, and same-sex love is definitely one of the topics.

<sup>131</sup> <http://cccwa.mca.gov.cn/article/sysw/zxjd/201103/20110300141465.shtml> While the website shows that this entry was created in 2011, it was at least particularly emphasized by showing it on the first page of inter-country adoption during the case of the American lesbian couple. There is no corresponding entry on the website's English version (<http://cccwaen.mca.gov.cn>). So it is very suspicious that this entry was in fact particularly created for this case.



China, a heterosexual family is the only legal form of marriage. Homosexuality is illegal and not protected by law. In accordance with China Classification and Diagnosis of Mental Disorders, homosexuality is psychosexual disorder. Chinese traditional morality and customs consider homosexuality a behavior against social norms and ethics. According to Chinese Adoption Law, adoption cannot go against social norms and ethics, and therefore, foreign same-sex couples cannot adopt children in China. Although the Wyatt case seems to have nothing to do with our discussion of the literary images of women's same-sex relations, it clearly illustrates that, in China, a strong base of heterosexuality, in complicity with deep-rooted traditional morality in support of modern science regarding sexuality, still controls the mainstream of social ideology. These factors make same-sex love an absolutely illegal form of interpersonal relationship that is completely inappropriate according to traditional principles and social norms, while at the same time, same-sex love is merely a curiosity about gender minorities for those who seem to be appealing for gender equality. In other words, those online voices criticizing CCCWA's rejection of the US lesbian couple are by no means a demonstration of a consciousness of real gender differences.

In practice, cultural productions, including literature, television, films and new media, have been always placed as significant propaganda of state ideology under the strict censorship of the Chinese government. Namely, it is the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television which gives critical supervision of homosexual-themed dramas by cutting out relevant contents or banning public releases. For instance, a 15-episode gay-themed web drama

*Shang Yin* 上癮 (*Addiction*) was suddenly taken offline from major Chinese video streaming sites after about one month after it went online. The last three episodes can only be watched on YouTube, which is blocked in mainland China. It is said that the themes regarding homosexuality and transgenderism have been increasingly popular in the fields of literature, video games and dramas in the web-sphere, for younger generations. *Addiction* has aroused heated discussion on social media ever since it went online and was viewed more than 10 million times the day after it premiered, according to its production house in Beijing. Peng Xiaohui at Central China Normal University, believes that young followers are curious about gender minorities and that the drama functions as “a pressure outlet for young people with low income and social status.”<sup>132</sup> The point itself shows that the recognition of gender issues in contemporary China is still very problematic in that the seeming acceptance of homosexual-themed productions is owing to a curiosity about the minorities rather than to an acknowledgement of an equal option of sexual preferences. In March 2016, the regulators clearly stated that the theme of homosexuality and some other elements regarding rebirth and reincarnation will be banned in TV dramas and films. At the beginning of 2016, President Xi Jinping visited the major state-controlled news organizations, including China Central Television, and clearly stated that the media should serve the Party, that is to say, the media exists as propaganda tools for the Communist Party, and in the case of China, for the government. Xi has been praised for his man-of-the-people ruling style and insightful

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<sup>132</sup> Lilian Lin and Chang Chen, *China Real Time*, WSJ, Feb 24, 2016.

foresight for the future of the nation in terms of his policies to push forward various reforms in politics, the economy and institutional systems revolving around people's daily lives, such as medical services and education. However, there is in fact a political intervention with which the state tends to tighten the regulation of the media and cultural productions to strengthen the political centralization. Television is the most influential propaganda organ, because it is embedded inside thousands of households as a terminal manner of state ideology dissemination that will have an influence on almost all generations. It is particularly effective with young people who are in the developmental stage of rebellion and easily irritated by unfair rules and policies. A politically and ideologically oriented supervision of television, as well as of the popular culture as a whole, is enforced as a state strategy to get young people, who haven't yet shaped their thoughts, unconsciously assimilated into the dominant ideology.

### **The Cinematic Images of Female-female Relationships: A Polarization**

The market for the film industry in contemporary China polarizes the image of Chinese female same-sex relationships: on one end, thoroughly non-erotic sisterly friendships within the overwhelming framework of patriarchy and heterosexuality, and on the other end, highly suspicious homosexual relationships in lesbian-themed stories. Films in the latter category will never be publicly released in mainland China, but they gain interest from minorities, in particular from younger generations, after receiving acclaim at some international film festivals. The former category is a genealogical continuity of the literary and cinematic representations of non-erotic sisterly sentiment in the sub-genre of post-modern romance, in which the sisterly figure(s)

function as an ideal to help the young female build up the self and achieve her life tale by introducing her into the patriarchal kingdom dominated by the power of masculinity. The romance drama film series, *Xiao Shidai* 小时代 (*The Tiny Times*), is a representative production of post-modern romance. It was adapted from the bestseller of the same name written by Guo Jingming. The film won commercial success in 2013, yet it received mostly negative critiques – a phenomenon frequently occurring in post-modern romance. The gorgeous urban setting of the film is metropolitan Shanghai, China's most populous city and the modern leader of China's economic and trade potential, as well as the cultural pioneer in opening the era of postmodernity. The film depicts the friendship among four young women from high school to college and how this friendship continues in the twists of their romantic affairs, career pursuits, misunderstandings, jealousy and significant changes in life. The film features the extremely luxurious and idealized lifestyle of China's younger generation, namely, the post-90s. The *Xiao* of the title, *Xiao Shidai*, literally *small* or *tiny*, homophonically indicating the name of the heroine, Lin Xiao, is in fact also a pertinent embodiment of the post-modern ethos opposed to the grand narrative of modernity. A big difference between the popular cultural productions depicting urban lifestyle in the post-modern era, and the works in literature, television, and cinema as well as its successor media with the background settings of Chinese modernization, is that the plots revolving around fighting against hard times in life, such as how a rural migrant or a person from the bottom class of society goes through miserable struggles against difficulties in life and career to seek for a chance to change his/her fate, have been gradually removed. In postmodern

productions, such themes have been replaced by a relatively lighthearted lifestyle without much life stress, but focusing on the subtleness of interpersonal emotions, including both heterosexual romance and same-sex sentiment. This leisureliness makes a notion that the big cities in contemporary China have gone through the stage of the great progress of urbanization, so that the young generations are enjoying their lives in a rather leisurely atmosphere, which is actually an absolute idealization and therefore might not be a panoramic representation of social status quo. The shift to the subtleness of interpersonal emotions also facilitates the characteristic of post-modern romance. In the portrayal of multiple leading characters, such as the case of the four heroines and four male protagonists in *Tiny Times*, a lot of ink has been given over to depicting same-sex relations, including brotherhood, sisterly sentiment and the forbidden zone of homosexuality, provoking reflective thoughts about the role of same-sex relations in self-identification as well as about the shaping of individual characters and life values in a personal developmental trajectory.

There is also a particular phenomenon in Chinese contemporary cinema in which the factor of same-sex relations has become an attractive spot for promotion strategies. In other words, the theme of homosexuality is a gimmick for production dissemination rather than a representation of sexual orientation in relation to gender differences. A typical example is a film titled *Ben Ai* 奔爱 (*Run for Love*), directed by five outstanding Chinese directors from the new generation headed by Zhang Yibai. The film consists of five extremely romantic short stories set in five different countries to celebrate romantic love among urban youths and was released on the

Valentine's Day in 2016. The poster and trailer of the film focus more on the very last story in which two young females who had never met before intertwined when they both fell in love with a man who died in a car accident. The trailer was intentionally edited to create the misunderstanding that the two female protagonists were physically intimate, indicating homoerotic feelings between the two. In fact, one of the heroines, Bai Xiezi (White Eggplant), is the lover of the male protagonist; his death is shown at the beginning of the story and he only appears in flashbacks in the film. He was travelling with his wife in Saipan, where they had a car accident, and he decided to donate his heart to save the life of his wife, Yiyi. The physically intimate scenes between the two women in the trailer are in fact cut from the sexual moments of the man with either Yiyi or Bai Xiezi, and edited together to make viewers believe it is a same-sex love story between the two heroines. One scene depicts Bai Xiezi trying to take off Yiyi's shirt and clinging to Yiyi's breast; in fact, she does this because she wants to hear the heartbeats of the man and she can only feel them in this way. The whole film turns out to be an extremely romantic love story between the opposite sexes. The fake editing of the trailer to deliberately create a homoerotic illusion is merely a promotion strategy to attract people's interest by making use of their curiosity about gender minorities.

At the other end of the polarization are the films which identify homosexuality with highly questionable same-sex love relations. Though these films appear in very limited quantities, they remain as an integration of the embodiment of elite culture into a wide range of Chinese contemporary films. In recent years, gender issues have been widely recognized as a significant

aspect of self-identification in both human society and in the field of academic research. As homosexuality is recognized as a justification for gender differences, stories involving homosexual factors have been increasingly produced and given much attention. With strict censorship from the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, Chinese film productions have been going through critical scrutiny in the same way as the television programs we have discussed above. Films involving homosexual factors, or questionable same-sex intimacy do not get approved for public release in mainland China. The producers either have to delete plenty of “inappropriate” scenes to get the film released, or they must seek markets in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other opportunities for screening at international festivals. These films are completely banned in mainland China. Few productions with very ambiguous features of same-sex love within an overall heterosexual orientation are lucky enough to make it through the investigation to be released. The strict censorship has an institutional impact on the development of variety in the cinematic representation of female same-sex intimacy. The small vague region between non-erotic sisterly sentiment that centers on self-identification and gender awakening in the transition from being a domestic member in a kinship structure to becoming a social individual building up subjectivity, and sexually-oriented homoeroticism that explores the flux of feminine imagery, has been simply replaced by a clear and fixed border imposed by state regulations. There’s nowhere to develop various representations of feminine imagery, and therefore, there is no space to recognize real gender differences, either. Given the variety in Chinese culture that has crossed geographical borders

and reconfigured a historically homologous Chineseness as cultural identities, not only within Asia, but also for the overseas Chinese diaspora, there are still outstanding films involving homosexual factors in a larger vision of Chinese cultural productions. An examination of two films here as examples of cinematic representations of female same-sex relationships will provide significant insight into the extremely ambiguous space between non-erotic sisterly sentiment and lesbian eroticism. I would like to explore how the theme of sisterly same-sex sentimental intimacy has been drawn into a sheer complexity of patriarchal oppression, cultural tradition, and local customs, and how sisterly sentiment has become a slippery area between non-erotic same-sex companions. Is there ultimately a clear boundary to differentiate women's homosexual eroticism from the wide range of female friendships that usually develop from an early age and that feature psychological projection? What does the conception of female homosexual eroticism consist of? Is it physical intimacy, lifelong commitment, or depression due to jealousy, betrayal and separation, which share similar characteristics with heterosexual romance?

***Shuang Zhuo (Twin Bracelets): Is Sisterly Sentiment A Way Out of Women's Oppression?***

*Shuang Zhuo* 双镯 (1991) is a Hong Kong film directed by the Taiwanese feminist director, Huang Yushan. It depicts the story of two young females in Hui'an, a remote fishing village in Fujian Province, in mainland China, who vow to become sister-spouses (姐妹夫妻, *Jiemei Fuqi*) in order to resist the patriarchal oppression from the harshness of the local marriage customs. The film has been labeled lesbian-themed and won the 1992 San Francisco Gay and Lesbian



Film Festival Award for Best Feature. A complex presentation of feminism, homosexuality, patriarchy, and ethnographic exoticism, the film remains very controversial in terms of the reception of its main theme. Some critics state that the film is clearly lesbian, while others tend to provide a feminist interpretation focusing on women's rebellion against the patriarchal oppression in the local society.

The film starts with a local wedding ceremony. The heroine, a young girl, insists on staying at the wedding ceremony to see the bride, which is not normally allowed for women, according to local customs. The locally dressed characters can easily be identified as ethnic minorities but the time period remains vague until later when we see people riding bicycles and when a bus driver tells a man on the bus taking pictures about the Hui'an customs, the man says that it is the 1980s. According to the bus driver, Hui'an women have arranged marriages and get married at a very early age. The newly-wed will stay in the house of her in-laws for only three days and then go back to her own family. She can meet her husband three times a year until she gets pregnant and then she can live with her husband in the house of her in-laws. In the wedding ceremony, there is one sentence from the wedding presenter that states the moral principles for women after marriage: "Obey your husband, respect your in-laws, and bear a son soon; be diligent and thrifty, love your husband forever, and then silver bracelets will turn to gold." The harshness of the local marriage customs makes Hui'an women psychologically resistant or even fearful of getting married. They tend to form a female community for understanding, companionship and psychological support. The heroine, Huihua, is a very rebellious Hui'an girl. Given all the local

rules and the miserable experiences she vaguely hears about from people around her, she just simply questions why she has to get married. She would like to stay with Xiu, who has been her close same-sex friend from childhood, and not marry a man. They vow to be sister-spouses, to live together, die together and not to be ungrateful to each other. On the other hand, Huihua knows quite well that sisters cannot stay together forever and that they will eventually marry men. She is concerned that Xiu will forget her and their vows after she gets married. Indeed, Xiu gradually does adapt herself to marriage. She is very lucky to be married to a kind man who loves and respects her, while Huihua marries to a man as brutal as her older brother. He beats his wife viciously and sees women as nothing but machines for producing children. The second day after her wedding, Huihua wants to get divorced and goes back to her own house. Remembering their vows of being blood sisters for lifelong companionship, she comes to Xiu for support. When Xiu tries to persuade her to go back to her husband, she feels that Xiu doesn't understand her anymore. Huihua finally commits suicide after she finds that Xiu is in fact leaving for Shenzhen with her husband very soon.

The controversial film raises serious discussions about the main cause of the same-sex relationship between Huihua and Xiu. The suspicion of a homosexual tendency between the two becomes very reasonable in that, first, the two young females prefer to live as sister-spouses rather than marry men. During the mid-autumn festival, one of the three times that a married woman is allowed to go to the house of her in-laws to meet her husband, Huihua even hurts herself to prevent Xiu from going to meet her husband. Engraving their vows in her heart and

knowing that Xiu will leave with her husband very soon, Huihua wants to die with Xiu. She finally commits suicide after Xiu tells her she is pregnant. Second, there are intimate scenes showing the closeness of the two when they sleep in the same bed and take a bath together in the same tub; in addition, there is a particular scene showing Huihua seeming to be extremely jealous when Xiu is learning opera and talking intimately with another girl. With all these plots, it seems very reasonable to believe this is definitely a lesbian-themed film.

Nevertheless, the film depicts female same-sex relationships in a very particular community of Hui'an women. Their miserable experiences with marriage due to the strict rules of the local customs make them feel frightened of or hate marriage. Huihua's rebellion by staying unmarried is therefore a resistance against the patriarchal oppression in the local society. She's not as lucky as Xiu in marriage. Her husband, just like her own brother, is a horrid, rich scoundrel who beats her on their wedding day. Having seen her sister-in law's miserable experiences, it's quite reasonable for Huihua to refuse to get married. Comparing her happiness with Xiu to the experience of marrying a man that she knows from around the village, it's quite natural for her to prefer to live with Xiu as sister-spouses. In this sense, to go back to her happiness with Xiu, Huihua has no choice but to prevent her from going to meet her husband, given that Xiu will stay with her husband forever if she gets pregnant. Their affection functions as understanding and support to survive the local tradition rather than as an erotic drive for homosexual love. With Xiu's departure, Huihua feels she has lost a comrade-in-arms. She knows no one is strong enough to carry on the fight alone. She sees no way out, so she commits suicide with the words,

“I have you in my heart forever.” It is hard to say if her suicide is due to Xiu’s “betrayal” – surrendering to heterosexual marriage – or if it is a final tragic rebellion against the severe oppression in the local authority of the patriarchal tradition. Second, even though scenes such as sleeping in the same bed or having a bath together indicate a physical closeness, the intimate physical relation between the two actually has been limited within the very natural physical contact that occurs among women who have bonded in a female sisterhood. In perhaps both the fields of creative writing and academic criticism, it is the absence of existing representation patterns of non-erotic sisterly sentiment – how the non-erotic female-female relation should be ultimately represented in forms of language and visual image – that causes controversial suspicion of homosexuality whenever physical closeness appears between same-sex companions. There are ultimately no other criteria to evaluate such same-sex representation but a doomed comparison with heterosexual norms. Any interior sentimentality will correspond with appropriate (or inappropriate) exteriority. Physical contacts, such as walking hand in hand, hugging, and even kissing, are very natural physical expressions of psychological intimacy between sisterly friends. Physical intimacy here inherently has nothing to do with homoeroticism; it is a primary femininity represented in female sisterhood. Huihua’s jealousy of Xiu’s inexplicit intimate speech with the opera actress shares a similar spirit. Why cannot a non-erotic sisterhood be a one-to-one relationship? It’s quite reasonable for a young female to feel uneasy when she sees the selected sisterly figure, who has been an intimate friend for understanding and psychological support from an early age, now turn to others. It might be

merely another characteristic of female sisterhood. Moreover, the film is very thoughtful in portraying a female same-sex relationship in a context determined by an emphasis on the particularity of the extremely tough oppression of women. Huhua's rebellion is not only reflected in her determined will to remain unmarried and live with Xiu as sister-spouses. From the very beginning, she seems very different from other women when she insists on staying at the wedding ceremony to see the bride, which is only allowed to men, according to local tradition. She says to her mother that she wants to go to school and get educated which is also an exclusive privilege for men in the local community. In this sense, her wish to stay with Xiu is merely one aspect – that has been infinitely zoomed in on as the main theme, though – to demonstrate her rebellion and struggle against the local rules, for an independent life. The key factor in differentiating non-erotic sisterhood from homosexuality lies in the fact that if the young female prefers to live with a woman for life, or for the sake of certain particularities, such as tradition, oppression, or personal experiences, she actually would like to stay with the one who understands her psychological needs and provides her emotional support because they have known each other from a very early age – a stage when close relationships are more likely to develop between people of the same sex, in the progress of personal development. The heroine in *Twin Bracelets* prefers to live with her sisterly companion rather than fulfill conventional expectations to become an obedient wife in an arranged marriage. Her suicide, in this sense, is more likely a desperate condemnation of the local society because of the oppression of women rather than a tragic leaving for the loss of homosexual love.

## ***Snow Flower and the Secret Fan: A Strong Sisterly Sentiment Amidst Overwhelming Patriarchal Oppression***

*Xuehua Mi Shan* 雪花秘扇 (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, 2011) is a film based on Lisa See's novel of the same name, telling about the tradition of female same-sex relationships in the rural area of Hunan province in the nineteenth century China. The film, directed by Wayne Wang, a Hong Kong-born American director, and starring Li Bingbing from Mainland China, Jun Ji-hyun from South Korea, and even Hugh Jackman from Hollywood, is truly a production of international cooperation. It features two languages (Mandarin Chinese and English), actors from different countries, and a controversial theme of same-sex love, given that same-sex themed films are often banned in mainland China. It was first released in June 2011 in mainland China, and one month later in the United States, and then on a limited worldwide scale. It received fairly negative critiques and comments in mainland China, though it won the Film of Merit award in the Shanghai Film Critics Awards in 2012. It's not surprising that such a film got bad ratings at the box-office and negative reviews from the public, but it does have many merits for academics to examine.

The film starts with a woman holding a brush and writing Chinese calligraphy, but her writing is in an unrecognized writing system, using characters other than those we normally use for the Chinese language. There is at the same time a hint of Chinese tradition and the heterogeneity of a local culture. Then the scene moves to metropolitan Shanghai in the present day. A young woman, Sophia, is riding a bicycle, racing with the traffic. She makes a phone call

to her sisterly friend, Nina, who is having a party with her colleagues at a luxury restaurant, but she gets no response. Sophia finally has an accident and is sent to the hospital. When Nina gets a phone call from the hospital regarding Sophia's accident, she goes to the hospital right away. Sitting at the side of Sophia's bed, she reads some papers from Sophia's satchel that state to be by Sophia Liao, telling the story of a same-sex sisterly relationship between two women, Snow Flower and Lily, in the old days. As Nina reads the story, the narrative proceeds towards a parallel framework of two same-sex sisterly relationships: one between Snow Flower and Lily in the old days, and one between Sophia and Nina in contemporary metropolitan Shanghai. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Lily, a girl in the rural area of Hunan province, was suffering foot binding. Her toes were squeezed by her mother to make her feet into three-inch "golden lotuses" so that she could be married to a good family in the future. On the same day, lotuses, while another girl named Snow Flower, from a fairly rich family, was also having her feet bound. In Sophia's story, these two girls were actually born on the same day, same month and same year, and had their feet bound at the same time, indicating that their destinies were tightly tied in some way. One day, Lily's mother found a matchmaker to look for a good man for Lily. The matchmaker thought it would be no problem to get Lily married to a good family since her tiny golden lotuses were delicate enough to ensure a good marriage. The matchmaker decided to find her a *laotong* first. We know from the narrative that a *laotong*, literally *old sames*, was a female same-sex relationship developed at an early age for companionship. At the time, marriage was for a man's choice and for reasons such as business alliances, household duties,

and having children to carry on the family line, while a *laotong* was a woman's choice; that is, in Sophia's aunt's words, for companionship, understanding and happiness. In this local tradition, the two girls swore loyalty at the temple and became *laotongs*. They learned *nüshu* – a special writing system particularly for women – and lived their everyday life together until they (or one of them) married into a new family. They wrote down their innermost thoughts and feelings in *nüshu* on a paper fan that they exchanged in order to read each other's hearts. They were sworn sisters for life.

It's worth noting that the *laotong* is also arranged by the matchmaker – the same person who arranges heterosexual marriages, using the same criteria for marriage. Lily's tiny golden lotuses found her Snow Flower, a girl from a rich family, for her *laotong* companion. Moreover, it seems that the *laotong* has an influence on the woman's choices for marriage, though she's completely passive. The narrative indicates that Lily finally had a good marriage, not only owing to her perfect tiny feet, but also because her *laotong*, Snow Flower, was from a rich family. Later in the film, Snow Flower said that her family was destroyed by her father's addiction to opium. If Lily had not been married to a good family, it wouldn't have been possible for Snow Flower to marry even a butcher. In other words, the *laotong* is a same-sex relationship tightly bound to and even working for heterosexual marriage, and it is finally dissolved upon marriage. After they were married, neither Lily's nor Snow Flower's in-laws wanted them to meet each other again. In this sense, the *laotong* is in fact not a relationship for women's own choices at all, but rather, it's derived from heterosexual marriage and has become a demonstration of women's miserable



sacrifice for marriage and the whole regime of patriarchy. It's a same-sex companion who exists before marriage, and to some extent, for marriage. On the day of Lily's wedding, Snow Flower accompanied Lily to the doorway and said to her, "Never forgot we swore loyalty forever, no man can come between us." Although they swore that they would be *laotong* for eternity, they knew quite well that they lived in a world in which they would be ultimately married to men. It's precisely the fact that the *laotong* is inherently affiliated to heterosexuality – the overwhelming oppression of patriarchy – that thoroughly closes the possibility for its transition to an erotic female-female relationship.

Although the fact that one of the heroines is named Lily offers a hint of a homoerotic relationship, given that "Lily" is a metaphorical term for "lesbian," the ambiguity of the *laotong*'s homosexual tendency to a large extent lies in the irreplaceability of the female companion. Lily became the lady of the house when her parents-in-law passed away. She invited Snow Flower to come into her family, to live a better life than the poor one she had with the butcher. But Snow Flower refused. She wrote on a paper fan to tell Lily that she had other sisters who accompanied her in her everyday life, which in fact was a lie because Snow Flower didn't want to be a burden to Lily. Lily felt very sad that their *laotong* relationship finally ended up with Snow Flower's leaving her for the other sisters. She considered Lily's leaving to be a betrayal of their oath, until she finally found out the truth. This irreplaceability differentiates the *laotong* from general female-female friendships and at the same time puts it on the same level as heterosexual marriage, raising a suspicion of the *laotong*'s homosexual tendency. As we've

discussed above, the reason that immediate suspicion of homosexuality is aroused when a woman who feels upset, sad, jealous or even enraged when her sisterly companion turns to others is because, in literary representations, there are no existing patterns of non-erotic female-female relations. As a result, the reception of female same-sex representations inevitably follows the heterosexual norms. It's quite natural for a woman who sees her intimate friend turning to others to feel frustrated, and in this sense, non-erotic sisterly sentiment might be precisely a one-to-one relationship. On the other hand, the film is an enlargement of a pair of *laotong* relationships among thousands of *laotong* companions in the local tradition. Before they were married, Snow Flower and Lily knew they would marry men; after they were married, it seems they had very normal family lives – being obedient to their husbands and parents-in-law, giving birth to babies, raising children, and taking care of the household – except for thinking of each other going through miserable periods, such as during a plague. It's a cinematic close-up of the subtle sentimentality between sisterly friends who knew each other from a very young age, so that the same-sex emotions of sensitivity, understanding and sacrificial support have been greatly foregrounded. It is therefore hard to say if they would really go beyond the boundary of heterosexuality without the overwhelming oppression of the patriarchy that utterly closes the possibility of transition.

It is, however, the parallel modern storyline that makes the *laotong* relationship between Snow Flower and Lily even more ambiguous, raising the question of the film's original message of rendering a theme of homosexuality veiled by sisterly friendship in a world of men. The part

of the film that portrays the old days in Hunan features women's same-sex relationships under an overwhelming patriarchy in the Chinese tradition – miserable foot binding to get a good marriage, absolute obedience to one's husband and parents-in-law, and passing on the house generation after generation, while the modern parallel becomes a comparison, in terms of not only a different ending of a female-female relationship but also a weakened power of men. Sophia lost her beloved father and lived with her stepmother, a fussy Shanghai woman who didn't treat her very well. The one who really understood Sophia was her aunt. She was also the person who introduced Sophia and Nina, in the local tradition of *laotong* in the past. Nina's mother has also been foregrounded as the head of the household, who not only took care of Nina's daily life, but also served as a spokesperson of the family to make decisions and give important advice. The male characters, such as Sophia's and Nina's boyfriends, are also greatly marginalized. The modern parallel portrays a world of women, with Nina as the epitome of the woman who has finally accomplished her goals on her own in the modern world. She attended the national examination for higher education, but wrote Sophia's name on the test paper and lost her own opportunity to enter college. Yet she worked hard and learned on her own and finally became an outstanding professional woman in her career. It seems that Nina worked in a world dominated by the power of masculinity, yet she finally made her own decision to stay in Shanghai for Sophia. She's therefore a completely independent and strong-minded woman who is very capable in the management of her thoughts, emotions, and everyday life. Sophia has a similar destiny to that of Snow Flower in her script. After Sophia lost her father, she almost

closed herself down, and Nina's leaving for New York made her even more depressed. She told Nina she would be leaving for Australia with her boyfriend, but in fact it was a lie because she didn't want to be an obstacle for Nina's career development. She put herself in the story about the *laotong* companionship between Snow Flower and Lily, which had become a modern *nüshu*; Nina finally discovered Sophia's deep emotion by reading the script at her bedside at the hospital. It is the ending moment, when Nina sees Snow Flower and Lily sitting on a balcony with a background of skyscrapers around the Yangzi River – a typical landscape of metropolitan Shanghai – that transcends the spatiotemporal dimension and creates a crossing point for the two parallel storylines. It is also in this moment that Nina finally decides there should be a different ending for the sisterly relationship in the modern time – sisters who swore a lifelong commitment to each other finally become a lifelong same-sex partners, as Nina finally says in her heart: "I'll never leave you. We'll be sisters for ten thousand years." The ending flash, in which a statue of a man as a symbol of phallicism has fallen down and been replaced by sisterhood, and then further turns to nothing, indicates a world dominated by masculinity has collapsed. The "nothingness" might be an implication of the nihilism features of an absolute freedom with no dominating power, or in another sense, it can also be an indication that there is no explicit way out for pure feminine imaginary yet, that is, a blank space raising questions on how to eventually construct a real gender differential. In an interview with the director regarding the original message that the film renders, Wang said: "I hope that, in the story of these two pairs of *laotongs*, I've presented a story that is at once cosmopolitan and universal, and that can

resonate equally for both men and women.” He clearly stated that the film aimed to touch upon gender issues, but he hesitated to label it as a lesbian film or to assert the feminine imaginary as its main theme.

The two films, one as a cultural production in 1990s when China accelerated modernization process through foreign investment and a more open market, and the other as a cosmopolitan work released after a decade when Chinese metropolises were stepping into the era of postmodernity, have many differences in terms of narrative structure, cinematic devices and the ending indicating women’s destiny. However, it’s worth noting that both *Twin Bracelets* and *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* tend to explore a feminine imaginary in a local society in which women are undergoing miserable oppression from an overwhelming patriarchal system that has been internalized as not only tradition but also as women’s destiny. On the one hand, this internalized oppression utterly closes off any possibility of women’s transition by engendering a psychological fixity on an ideological conception, lifestyle, and sexual preference. This fixity has been further naturalized in the predominance of a patriarchal system controlled by an absolute masculine power. By creating a sheer complexity of patriarchal tradition, women’s oppression, and female same-sex sentimental intimacy, this internalization leads to the controversial debate as to whether the original message that such cultural productions render are ultimately homosexual or feminist. It also shows a deficiency of ambition in the representation of the images of female homosexuality. Female same-sex intimacy has always been intertwined with a particularity of individual factors as a passive option, such as the absence of the father, or a

particularity of local tradition. Such images of female same-sex relationship however raise another possible logicity of female same-sex imagination. Given that women's oppression by patriarchal tradition indeed leads to the formation of female communities for companionship, support and survival and that the ending of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* clearly indicates a female same-sex companion as a lifestyle, homosexuality is therefore also socially, culturally and historically constructed as a pattern of female lifestyle that might be either defined as lesbian or female sentimental intimacy without an erotic drive. In other words, the particularity of female same-sex intimacy features psychological projection as a representation of femininity that has been formed in the long history of women's oppression in the social system of patriarchy and gender inequality; therefore, it's inappropriate to define female homosexual relationships in accordance with the existing homosexual patterns for males as a parameter. The absence of a variety of existing representations of female same-sex relationships in literature and cinema precisely results from the narrowness of female homosexuality defined in accordance with the patterns of same-sex relationships between men. It once again falls into the trap of what Irigaray has argued is the sameness of masculine logic as the only one discourse – an ignorance of real gender differentials.

The same-sex relationship between Nina and Sophia in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is different from the typical non-erotic sisterly sentiment that places emphasis on the transitional stage for self-identification and the development of subjectivity through psychological projection. In particular, the ending indicates a final lifelong companionship between Nina and

Sophia, and it is quite different from the images of homoeroticism that feature physically sexual intimacy between women. By exploring the possible patterns of female-female relationships in the new era of postmodernity, it is a genealogical successor of sisterly same-sex sentiment. The difficulty in discussing female same-sex relationships that are oppressed by the masculine patriarchy, as with the women in these two films, is that the harshness of the local tradition makes women afraid of heterosexual marriage. This makes us keep thinking about the possibility that the heroines would prefer to stay with each other for life without such cruel oppression by the patriarchy. However, if we recognize that homosexuality is socially, culturally and historically constructed and that patriarchal oppression is absolutely a significant factor of such construction, it will be quite clear that the female-female relationship between Huihua and Xiu, as well as the *laotong* companion in the old days in Hunan, is a pattern of female homosociality that comes into being within the absolute domination of the patriarchal system. Such cinematic representations illustrate the richness of female same-sex relations that might be more properly coined “sisterly same-sex sentiment” rather than “homosexuality.”

As a genealogical form of female same-sex relationships formed and developed in the long history of modern Chinese literature and society, this sisterly same-sex sentiment is basically a non-erotic relationship for women’s survival, companionship, support and happiness, and might be a one-to-one relationship for lifelong companions. Going through variations in different social contexts and time periods, a typical sisterly same-sex sentiment features the construction of women’s self-identification and subjectivity through psychological projection provided by the

sisterly figure who finally conveys the young female to heterosexual marriage. Sometimes, with less suggestion in relation to sexuality, it might become “sisterly sentiment” enclosed by an overwhelming patriarchal system, such as the thoroughly non-erotic sisterly relationships in contemporary Chinese popular culture. On the other hand, with the implication of “same-sex,” it at the same time keeps the original appearance of female-female relationships developed within the patriarchal system, which is paradoxically a reflection based on real gender differentials and the possibility of women’s transition to homoeroticism without the cultural regime of the patriarchy. It further helps to interpret the ambiguities in the slide from non-erotic sisterly sentimental intimacy to a possible but ever-absent female homoerotic transition caused by the longtime patriarchal oppression, and at the same time embodies the richness of female-female same-sex relations.



## CONCLUSION

This study has genealogically traced the thematic significance of female same-sex sentimentality in the construction of the space of the female imaginary in modern Chinese literature from the beginning of the twentieth century to contemporary popular culture. By focusing on the textual and cinematic representations of sisterly same-sex sentiment in female-authored fiction and woman-centered films, I have argued that female same-sex intimacy is produced from the discursive domination of masculine Oneness as a psychologically intimate relationship, upon which a young female accomplishes her social recasting of self-identification in the transitional stage from kin-inflected family to institutional-based society, and is simultaneously conveyed into the next stage of heterosexual marriage. The sisterly figure, who is selected as an ideal ego in accordance with the criteria approved by patriarchal censorship, mirrors the heterosexual-invented trajectory of female maturation for the young female's reconfiguration in the crystallizations of dignity, character formation, and gender awakening. Undertaking the whole process of helping the young female step out of domestic confinements to developing a repressed subjectivity as a gendered individual and finally returning back into the domestic roles of being wife and mother, this female same-sex intimacy embodies the integrity of heterosexual mechanics and the cultural imposition of patriarchal hegemony; at the same time, as a carrier of the space of female imaginary, it performs the fluidity of becoming a woman, a temporal process in which a subjective individual is emerging at the intersection of the

productivity of heterosexuality and the possible capability of fighting against the cultural imposition of heterosexuality. In other words, this female same-sex relationship, initially produced as a non-erotic intimacy for the purpose of maintaining virginity and chastity to go through the censorship of patriarchal morality, is at the same time contingent on the changing of discursive (de)construction of the gender binary, a process parallel to the subjection process of becoming a woman. Sisterly same-sex sentiment sophisticates the masculine-inscribed trajectory of female development in modern civilization by bridging the gap between being a daughter and being a mother.

In terms of the constitutive significance of sisterly same-sex sentimentality in female self-development, identity formation and individual subjectivity in the context of Chinese women who hold up the mask of the oriental myth to the Western gaze, this study employs psychoanalysis, feminism, and colonial/post-colonial criticism as main theoretical approaches. Becoming a disciplinary subject, for a woman, is an on-going process without a start and without an end. As Butler stated, there is no natural body that pre-exists gender. Completely ascribing the developmental trajectory of an individual to a series of fixed stages based on sexual drive, Freudian psychoanalysis presumes that a little girl, who is initially bisexual and primarily desires her mother, experiences gender awakening for the first time in realizing her lack of a phallus. She holds her mother responsible for her lack of a penis as a disadvantage of her being and turns to her father, and at the same time, her identification with her mother is accomplished. I believe, as a matter of fact, the significance of family to a woman's gender awakening lies in its

precondition of heterosexual marriage, which brings the kinship-based structure into the entire mechanics of the nation-state system. Being aware of the fact that she herself is the result of the heterosexual marriage of her parents, and that the heterosexual familial structure is the only normal unit that constitutes the complex web of human society, the little girl has already framed her primary mental imagery of gender preference. As a production of heterosexual marriage, the little girl is going through self-identification with her mother who practices her domestic roles in everyday family life. As a targeted individual of patriarchal kinship, the young female is confined, supervised, and moreover, is trained into a “docile body” through gaining family education. By the time the young female enters the modern education system as a transitional stage of social recasting in her developmental trajectory, she is far more than being innocent to the power regime of heterosexuality in complicity with the cultural imposition of patriarchy; rather, she has already been a disciplinary subject produced from within the whole mechanics of heterosexuality and patriarchy. Thus, she will try to avoid developing friendships with the opposite sex in order to maintain her reputation of virginity before marriage on one hand; on the other hand, she will have to deal with a variety of anxieties caused by her fairly direct connection with the institutional society and heterosexual romance, in which a same-sex sisterly figure is selected as a psychological reliance for survival. Being selected in accordance with the patriarchal criteria, this sisterly figure functions as an ideal ego who mirrors the developmental trajectory for the young female and conveys her back into the domestic positions as being wife and mother, by entering heterosexual marriage. As Foucault’s formulation of disciplinary subject

formation says, “Subjection is, literally, the *making* of a subject, the principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced. Such subjection is a kind of power that not only unilaterally *acts on* a given individual as a form of domination, but also *activates* or forms the subject.”<sup>133</sup>

A process that parallels to the subjectivation of women is the discursive (de)construction of gender as a man-made category, upon which the dominant discourse of the nation-state is able to operate as an exterior power to mediate the interplay between the nation-state system and the gendered subject. The theme of sisterly same-sex sentiment, which is how the image of female-female sentimentality is represented in literature – a site that is not only in conjunction with historical trends, but also undertakes the role of bridging historical gaps to create the continuity – is contingent on the contextual changing of the state discourse to engender a collective agency for Chinese women, through which women are integrated into the whole operation of nation-state, and become a unity to identify the social mainstream. In the beginning of the twentieth-century, when China went through an enforced progress of western civilization, Chinese women were liberated from the oppression of Confucian principles that had ideologically dominated Chinese families and Chinese society for thousands of years, and were allowed to enter the modern education institutions to demonstrate China’s modern progress. The formation of Chinese New Women is indispensably constitutive to Chinese modernity. Leaving the kin-inflected positions of docile daughters within the familial structure as both a confinement and a

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<sup>133</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 84.

protection, the path to becoming Chinese New Women was by no means easy and flat. The young females, without any existing pattern to follow, had to explore their own ways as they were becoming the New Women. They encountered a variety of modern anxieties, for example, the worries caused by the delayed modern transformation of their families, the uneasiness that came with free love, the efforts to fight against the marriages arranged by their families, the stress of returning to the domestic confines by entering heterosexual marriage, the upsurge of student movements and school suspensions caused by the increasingly urgent situation of the Chinese revolution. In a word, an uncertainty about the future – the path after gaining modern education – was produced by the process of modern civilization as a tension between a longing for becoming an independent modern individual and a society that had not been planning to get prepared for women's liberation based on real gender differentials. As discussed in above, given the fact that the friendships developed in the modern institutions at this stage were designated to be the same-sex, the young females looked for a sisterly figure, as a psychological reliance and ideal ego in the institutionalized society, to survive these modern anxieties and the transitional stage of social recasting. Sisterly same-sex sentiment, therefore, became a carrier of modern anxieties – a mediation between the discursive constructions of women's subjectivity and Chinese modernity.

As the quest for nation salvation had become increasingly urgent by the end of the 1930s, the image of Chinese women had to give its priority to the discourse of Chinese revolution. To create a uniformity of national discourse, the theme of sisterly same-sex sentiment that was

flourishing in the literary field a decade before, was de-selected, or diminished into an insignificant slice in female bildungs journeys, and gradually faded out of the literary representations of women. Instead, the image of revolutionary women was created to carry out the political strategy of total mobilization during the wartime fighting against Japanese Imperialism. It is worth noting that a delayed representation of the passionate participation and the bravery of revolutionary women was created in the 1950s to celebrate the birth of the new Communist China. In this period, the theme of female same-sex sentimentality was not only de-selected, but also condemned as elements of the bourgeois that went against the monolithic discourse of Chinese Communism. This is not to say that the theme of sisterly same-sex sentiment completely disappeared in literature; by no means was this episode of same-sex friendship disappeared in the trajectory of female development, either. Rather, the unity of the state discourse – a eulogy of Chinese revolution and the early socialism – is realized through a de-romanticization of the trajectory of becoming women, and this is how gender strategy operated, so that women were once again discursively constructed as a collective agency that was both constitutive and subordinate to the nation-state. In other words, the theme of sisterly same-sex sentiment was a carrier of the monolithicity of the state discourse in negation.

The new era of Chinese economic reform starting from the late 1970s not only brought back the theme of female sentimentality with new contents, but also provided a possibility of opening up the enclosure of the non-eroticity of sisterly same-sex sentiment that was created within the dominant discourse of masculine oneness. Female same-sex sentimentality became a reflection

of the tension between women's professional pursuits in the rapid development of Chinese modernization and their domestic responsibilities in heterosexual marriage. The sisterly figure, who was selected as an ideal ego and finally conveyed the young female into a "homeward" journey in early twentieth-century China, now became a "significant other" outside the marriage to whom they could pour out the bitterness that they suffered in heterosexual marriage. In other words, sisterly same-sex sentiment that carried the anxieties caused by heterosexual marriage in Chinese modernization helped women not only survive but also fight against the oppression of heterosexual marriage. This new content of sisterly same-sex sentiment was, on one hand, owing to the fact that many of the women writers in the new generation who spent their youth in the Cultural Revolution had already married when they started their writing careers, and therefore, it was more likely that their writings placed emphasis on women's lives after marriage; on the other hand, in the new era of Chinese modernization, when the society had already been prepared for educated women to become economically independent, women's anxiety has correspondingly changed from the uncertainty about the future to the contradiction between the construction of individual subjectivity and the domestic confinement of heterosexual marriage. Consequently, the theme of sisterly same-sex sentiment was closely associated with the literary exploration of women's subjectivity; at the same time, this re-emergence was consolidated with a historical invention of a homogeneous female tradition in modern Chinese literature, in which the women writers in the Republican era were recognized as pioneers and represented the legacy of female tradition. That is to say, in the new era of Chinese economic reform, the theme of sisterly same-

sex sentiment has become a constitutive element of the discursive representation of women's subjectivity and the homogeneity of female tradition that was invented to break away from the state discourse of feminism represented by the political apparatus of the All-China Women's Federation.<sup>134</sup> This female tradition revolving around women's subjectivity gradually grew into the mainstream of women-centered literature and further developed into a variety of literary representations of women in an increasingly global world. The theme of sisterly same-sex sentiment not only survived the immediate crisis of de-elitization starting from the early 1990s, but also showed new vitality in the new era of post-modernism. The rise of new generations of Chinese women writers brought the literary images of women into a new horizon of transnationalism and internationalism, in which the theme of female same-sex sentimentality is invested with a sheer complexity in discussion with war, race, gender and sexuality. More importantly, in many female-authored stories that center on sisterly same-sex sentiment, the theme, as an embodiment of the space of female imaginary, indicates a slipping from non-erotic sisterly sentiment to the edge of female homosexuality, which opens up the enclosure of non-erotic female same-sex sentimentality created by the cultural oppression of heterosexuality and becomes a possible discursive force to undermine masculine oneness from within.

In light of the modern construction and the postmodern deconstruction of gender as a man-made category in both theory and society, there is a rapidly increasing prevalence of research on

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<sup>134</sup> Lydia Liu, "Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature" in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-century China*, eds. Ellen Wider and David Der-wei Wang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 196-8.



same-sex relationships, in which intimate affinity between the same sex is preferably taken as and critically examined from the perspective of its being a form of homoeroticism, aiming to legitimize homosexuality on the verge of the collapse of the heterosexual system from its problematic within, consolidated with analogical analyses of gender and race. It is not my intention to state an argument going against this tendency. Rather, with the study of non-erotic female same-sex sentimentality, I would like to point out that, first, this female same-sex intimacy is a production of the power regime of heterosexuality and the cultural oppression of patriarchy; consequently, it is initially and primarily non-erotic; it demonstrates the discursive manipulation of gender strategy and mediates women's connection to the system of the nation-state. Second, the theme of female same-sex relationship is closely associated with the construction of women's subjectivity, rather than an indication of female homosexuality. Third, female same-sex sentimentality is a discursive carrier of Chinese modernization in different historical and social contexts; it embodies the fluidity of the space of female imaginary, and shows the possibility of undermining the discursive domination of masculine oneness from within. Finally, sisterly same-sex intimacy, and the ambiguity that it creates to raise a suspicion of homosexuality, should be understood in the problematic definition of female homosexuality based on the masculine parameters; that is to say, the particularity of female same-sex sentimentality remains inarticulate and absent. This genealogical study is committed to re-discovering the space of female imaginary on the basis of real gender differentials.

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